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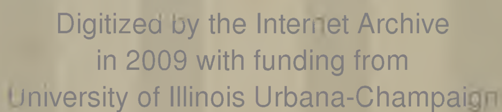
VOL. II.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FAUCIT OF BALLIOL

A Story in Two Parts.

BY

HERMAN CHARLES MERIVALE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

Third Edition.

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PART I.

The Prologue.

(CONTINUED.)

"Mephistopheles thrown upon real life, and obliged to manage his own plots, would inevitably make blunders."—*George Eliot.*

CHAPTER XVII.

THE COUNT LESTRANGE.

I WAS moralising, some chapters ago, probably little to the satisfaction of my readers, upon the trials of the post. There is another side to those trials on which I often reflect, when I see a brief paragraph in the papers stating that John Noakes, letter-carrier, has been arrested, and that so many hundred letters have been found in his possession. So many losses perhaps, so many sorrows, so many misunderstandings, not to be repaired. The form of theft is an amusement which certainly seems on the increase.

It was my lot not long ago to be living in a country-town about half-an-hour from London, for a space of some eighteen months. In that time I had seven correspondences with the General Post-Office—which

has so little to do in its own line of work that it has just taken the telephones under its fostering care, on the ground that the Crown bought them before they were invented—upon the subject of letters of mine which never reached their destinations. I had many more such losses, about which I was too fairly disheartened to write. Once I received a peremptory summons from Her Majesty's Collector of Taxes, about a form which he said I had neglected to fill up and return. I had done it weeks before, and was able to tell him the day. His answer was that he was very sorry he had troubled me, for six or seven others in the district had given him the same explanation. I appealed to everybody at the General Post-Office, from the temporary Chief to the permanent clerk; I represented that the staff at the local office should be overhauled or changed; I consulted the tradesmen in my town, who told me that the state of their post-office was notorious, but as for the General Office, "Lord, sir; you might as well complain to the king of the Zulus." Still I tried, and to all my appeals I got but one answer—that "it should be looked into." The answers were nearly always signed by the same gentleman, whose name I grew to hate; afterwards, to my cynical delight, knighted for his

"eminent service to the State." How I chuckled when I read of the appointment! Once I wrote to him with gentle satire, hoping that next time he would vary his formula, and tell me that it had been looked into. He answered me quite placidly by return of post, as before, that it should be. It never was. No change whatever was made at the local office; and the imperturbable official in charge always asked me at what exact minute of the day and in what exact box I had posted the lost letter, necessarily long before. At last I kept record and was able to answer him. He said, 'Ah'; but proved to me that I had not ascertained my facts with sufficient exactness. I could not swear whether my last letter went by the 4·10 post or the 4·20, three weeks before. It was idle to expect redress if I was so careless as this. I was quite beaten; gave up complaining; and if I had letters especially important, at last used to take them to town with me, to post at my club. And I reflected, seeing a correspondence in the paper about a monument to Sir Rowland Hill, that the monument he would best have liked would be that his successors should do some of the work the country pays them for. I wonder if he used to write and say it should be looked into.

John Noakes happened to be employed at the office

in Devonshire when Guy Faucit sent his last appeal to Daisy Fairfield; and whether it was that he was then trying his prentice hand, and experimenting on the touch of stamps, or was a hardened offender, who stole letters out of pure "cussedness," as others upset railway-trains, he was the link in the chain of events which form this history, which prevented Daisy's hearing from Guy. Such a part in life do commonplaces play. I cannot tell what would have happened if she had received the letter, or that it would have made any difference in the catastrophe. But I do not want Daisy Fairfield to lie under the suspicion of having kept silence upon such an appeal. Wilmot's news, however, was unhappily too true; and when Mrs. Faucit was dying in the Devonshire cottage, she became the affianced wife of Mr. John Brent. Upon this part of Daisy's story I cannot bear to dwell. "*Fais ce que dois, advienne que pourra,*" was so entirely her motto, that I think at no cost should she have been led into so perverted an idea of duty, as to sacrifice herself to become the wife of a man she did not love, with her heart full of the image of another. I can never believe that anything ever really justifies that, though the largest of allowances is often to be made, and never larger than in Daisy's case. The nets

which circumstance wove for her were very closely meshed indeed.

Guy Faucit had gone down to Devonshire; Daisy Fairfield had dined at Lady Pepperharrow's, and made the acquaintance of Lady Luscombe, and was by her being initiated into the social mysteries of a more fashionable world than the old circle in which she at first began her going-out life, crushing down the deep pain in her heart, and wearing the customary mask which the world demands of its votaries; aimless and objectless and sad, but winning general admiration wherever she went. She would have stayed at home and looked after her mother only too willingly, and thrown all this aside. But she did not want her story known; still less did she wish that any talk should get abroad of the condition of affairs at Fairfield's, which her social success would help to dissipate as much as anything.

The sword of Damocles still hung suspended over her father's head; and Mr. John Brent, patient and catlike, bided his time.

Now, it happens that Mr. John Brent had a singular auxiliary at hand when he began to lay his formal siege and advance his parallels. Some years before he

had made the acquaintance, out in India, of a man who had been introduced to him in connection with some intricate city business at home, who seemed to come from nowhere, and have no very definite occupation, yet to occupy positions of influence and trust at all sorts of times in all sorts of places, and to possess, for the purpose of confidential missions, a special and striking gift for swaying the wills and winning the ears of men. When he made his first appearance in Calcutta circles, young, though not in his first youth, he impressed men at once with the idea of almost universal knowledge, of a satirical power of observation, which strengthened his position indefinitely by making everybody half afraid of him, and a charm of conversation which very few could resist.

The sinister but handsome face, the low musical voice, of which no word was often lost, and the acute intelligence which grasped all the sides of a situation at once, made an exceptional and impressive personage of the Count Lestrange. Why he was a Count, and where the Countship came from; whether he had inherited it from some ancient race, or gotten it for himself from some grateful sovereign of a court large or petty, in recognition of secret services to a starving

exchequer; whether Lisbon, or the Holy Roman Empire, or the capital of the Cannibal Islands, all which places seemed equally familiar to him, was originally responsible for the decoration, was never exactly known.

Men muttered and questioned at first, and talked about "adventurer" and "impostor," and used harder words than that. But from the beginning they did not care to use these expressions very loudly, or provoke a certain cold and dangerous glitter which had a knack of coming stealthily into the Count's eyes, and taking by surprise the offenders who had not marked its beginning. Moreover, there were things whispered of his having "killed his man" more than once in countries where it was not yet impolite to do so, and it was said that, even where it was not polite, he had been known to make it so.

So gossip and ill-report died away in the wake of a man so desirous of pleasing where he was allowed, and of making himself generally useful; and the quarterings of the Prince of Ark and Ararat were not more unquestioned by society in the course of time than those of the Count Lestrange. He stood well with the Rothschilds, had been trusted by the Torlonias, and had recovered bad debts for Overend and Gurney's among

the most morally dilapidated of South American republics; and when first he made acquaintance with John Brent, in the interests of a firm which was working the Great Magnibonium Railway at an increasing dividend to the subscribers of thirteen-and-a-half per cent., but had not for the moment as much ready cash in hand as could be wished, he had just been engaged in examining some Parsee schools in the south of India on a commission from the British Government. This was the man who became, upon his homeward visit to Calcutta, the adviser and intimate, and "fidus Achates," of Mr. John Brent.

I am no master of the involutions of finance, especially in the hands of such a keen diplomatist as the Count Lestrange; nor do I know how it was that he first discovered in Brent the man to serve him in the matter of the Magnibonium Railway.

So he did, however; and from his fortunate connection with that concern, which announced a dividend of fifteen per cent. shortly afterwards, and then collapsed with a stupendous crash which half-ruined hundreds of confiding shareholders,—who had not reflected that such a rate of interest for themselves probably represented proportionate injury to at least as many others unknown

—dated Mr. Brent's first great rise in the world. He was quite as careful about it as he was about everything; and when the crash came, it hurt him no halfpenny in purse or credit.

The confiding shareholders filled the newspapers with lament and woe; pitiful stories of half-pay officers and maiden ladies, who had justly expected not less than a safe fifteen per cent. for their little all, resulted in tears and sympathy from many of the benevolent, and subscriptions from some; leading articles, pitched upon the highest key of morality, held up the directors to the reprobation of honest men, as indeed they deserved, the only question being where the honest men were; and some of the directors were finally brought to trial and acquitted, as having been on the whole confiding, whereupon the leading articles recanted, and expressed their sympathy.

Mr. Brent, meanwhile, had nothing to do with the thing except to realize (if I make any mistake upon this difficult ground, I must ask the reader to believe that the incorrectness lies in the narrator, but not in the events narrated); and Count Lestrange, who, without a profession or a penny of capital, used to set down his brains as worth so much a year, and made it about as

regularly as a government official receives his salary, was paid too in his own modest way, and pocketed his fee for his services. But he made out of the transaction, in the pulling of the secret strings, something else which the dangerous adventurer valued more than money. When John Brent came back to England, he, on his part, who had netted the house of Fairfield, was somehow in Lestrange's power.

It was this same Magnibonium Railway business into which Fairfield and Co. had been drawn through the activities of the junior partner; and Mr. Fairfield had, by a course of events of which he was really the victim and the dupe, and not the promoter, fallen into the danger of being one of the scapegoats of the concern, and having one day to stand in the dock to answer for the Magnibonium Railway. The junior partner, much to his annoyance and surprise, for he had fancied himself warm and safe on the windy side, and had certainly taken every possible precaution to make himself so, was one of those who did eventually stand there, and escaped as related, to begin business under new colours afterwards, and to do very well for himself in the world indeed.

It was in the autumn of the year of which I

have been writing that the Magnibonium catastrophe came, and during the weary months which preceded it, Mr. John Brent was pursuing his object calmly and relentlessly. Daisy was being slowly and hopelessly drawn into the toils, and her hapless father was breaking in health and constitution fast and surely, under the pressure of his lingering suspense. He clutched at straws, and clutched in vain, and made appeals to Brent which might as well have been addressed to the monument.

> Come sul capo al naufrago
> L'onda s' avvolve e tesa,
> L'onda su cui del misero
> Alta pur dianzi e tesa,
> Scorrea la vista a scernere
> Prode remote invan—

So his troubles crushed Septimus Fairfield as he looked for a plank, and looked in vain. He might have found help elsewhere if it would have availed him. Lady Pepperharrow, if she had known of the situation, would have made her Hugh sell Glycerine House to help Daisy; but the Magnibonium toils were too close for that, and could be loosed by Brent only. And Brent himself, in all the complications of this labyrinthine business, which utterly baffled the general

reader who tried to understand them from the newspaper reports of the trial of the directors, was in some way in the hands of Lestrange, who used him. So consistently tortuous had been the proceedings of the Magnibonians, that everybody was in somebody else's power, like the personages in the famous dead-lock in the 'Critic.' Everybody,—except Lestrange, who pulled all the strings and worked all the machinery, and was paid his fee for his services in some indefinite but truly respectable way; who was able to do many a friend a good turn during the winding-up of the gigantic skein; materially advanced the fortunes of the house of Luscombe, among others, by means of it, and gave some evidence in court which much damaged some and much distinguished others,—shedding quite a lustre, for instance, on the character of John Brent,—being finally complimented by the judge upon his disinterested labours and his brilliant services to the shareholders in the hour of their need. The few of those who could afterwards afford it felt themselves bound to subscribe for a handsome piece of plate, which was presented to the Count after an elegant oration from Cicero Wrigley, Esq., in the names of those of the misguided shareholders who owed him their preservation from entire shipwreck.

It has been already told how, at Lady Pepperharrow's festival, the Count Lestrange first saw Daisy Fairfield in the very flush and radiance of her new-born happiness. The Count was a connoisseur in beauty, and had seen so much of it in all parts of the world, that he was slow to move to anything like admiration, though every pretty woman gave him pleasure. Of late, his devotion had been quietly exclusive in one quarter. Familiar with all phases of the world, he had some seasons before first come to London from abroad, in which vague region, though he was supposed to be of an English family, he had been born and bred, or said so. He came on a diplomatic mission from some German court, well accredited and with good introductions, and made his way in society at once. He was accepted on his own merits, as such men sometimes are, without much inquiry into antecedents. The German court had got him from another German court, on some mission or another, which other German court had got him from somewhere else. He was a kind of reputable Autolycus, picking up the unconsidered trifles which gradually make a career, and knew capitals and men so well, that life seemed to have given him the best education in her power. She taught him by the process

of passing him on, till he anchored, as much as he could anchor, in the great port of London. He found his sphere there at once; for he suited London, and London suited him. The fascination of the sunless city for foreigners who come there with good introductions, and do not fly from the first appalling aroma of soot into the bluest wilderness they can find, has always been very great. I believe it to be a fact, that if the *attachés* of the world were polled, they would vote for London in an overwhelming majority. They find the Circean arms of society open for them all, a sort of republic under a monarchy which is the harmonious result of England's incongruous growth, the idlers at their idlest and the workers at their best; brilliant talkers still surviving, and surviving with less of egotism than was wont to be a talker's bane; women with less of restriction than ties their hands in some countries, and not too much of freedom to wound the taste as in some others; and, stoutly as an Englishman I will maintain, on the whole the prettiest in the world. Lestrange, out of his wide experience, maintained it always, and vindicated his position by pointing to the theatres.

"There is the test," he said. "I see so many actresses, that in society proper I am no fair judge.

Sweet are the society beauties who grace the albums and shop-windows; and why on earth shouldn't they?

> "'Small is the worth
> Of beauty from the light retired;
> Bid her come forth,
> Suffer herself to be admired,
> And not blush so to be desired.'

"The beauties are quite right, and should not 'to parties give up what was meant for mankind.' For one young acolyte who burns his incense to the original in a London drawing-room, a thousand chawbacons may smoke their pipes in Yorkshire under the sweet nose of the copy, and never offend its delicacy. But for one of society's sweethearts, I can show you a dozen pretty actresses in a day whose trains she ought to carry. Where is the theatre abroad where one can feel sure of such a feast to the eye? I don't care about brain-sauce, which spoils it. I like to feel like a Turk in his harem, when I disport myself in my stall at the Fantasy, and pay my half-guinea for my whole seraglio. The theatres of England prove the prettiness of her women, and I care not who says me nay. '*Vive la Bohême!*'"

It was when he had expressed these lawless sentiments one day that Lestrange sate down at Lady Luscombe's

piano, and confirmed them in a ballad in which he had embodied them :

Joyeux pays des gens joyeux,
Les beaux esprits de ce bas monde,
Pour te donner à nos aïeux,
Vénus sortit jadis de l'onde.
La belle reine de bonté
Protégera tout cœur qui aime,
Et vit toujours, dans sa beauté,
Pour les enfans de la Bohême.

Le musiçien va fredonnant
Les doux airs de son répertoire ;
Le peintre vient en exploitant
Les belles couleurs pour sa victoire ;
Le poête rêve le beau,
Chantant en dépit de soi-même :
Le luth, la plume, le pinçeau,
Ouvrent pour nous nôtre Bohême.

La route parsémée de fleurs,
Voilà bien d'autres qui s'avançent ;
En foule viennent ces chers pécheurs,
Les gens qui jouent, les gens qui dansent !
Il est heureux, le Bohémien,
Car pour bien égayer sa serre,
Il sait trouver, sur son chemin,
Les belles filles de la terre.

Versons le bon vin pétillant !
À l'avenir ne songeons guère :
Si le sort pour nous est méchant,
À l'avenir buvons la bière !

Nous donnons gaîment d'une main,
Quand nous avons la bourse pleine,
Et de l'autre prenons demain,
Des bons amis qui ont la veine.

Que l'avocat ne frappe pas !
Il trouvera la porte close ;
Et n'entre pas que dans le cas,
Où il serait causeur, sans cause :
Le médecin n'en est pas vraiment,
Qu'il tue à part sa clientéle !
Il faut, pour y aller gaîment,
Assez de cœur, et de cervelle !

Le dévôt maudit son voisin,
Tous les Dimanches à la messe,
Mais prêchera pour nous en vain
Son évangile de tristesse :
Qu'il se fasse sa propre loi,
Faisons y guerre, et à outrance !
Nôtre devise, c'est la Foi,
La Charité, et l'Espérance.

Tout las de travail,—où de vin,
Bien doucement quand on sommeille,
Là-haut, un petit chérubin
Sur nous exprès sans cesse veille ;
Ainsi, quand au dernier moment
La Mort à nôtre porte sonne,
Saluons-la en souriant :
"Viens ! je n'ai fait mal à personne !"

Nous croyons à la vérité,
La droite ligne de la vie,
De l'amour et de l'amitié
La vraie franc-maçonnerie ;

Le sage ne croit à rien,
Excepté toujours à soi-même ;
Mais le bon Dieu, qui fait tout bien,
Chérit ses enfans de Bohême.

The Count trolled the verses out, or some of them, for eight stanzas of a song are more than propriety admits of, in days when the poet is naught and the composer everybody, and words are but as pegs to hang tra-la-la's upon. Having been a writer of song-words, among other things, I speak feelingly. It is not long since I beheld, if I may for a moment borrow one of the oddities of type affected by that manliest and most human of living story-tellers, Charles Reade, a song advertised in a music-seller's window thus, or thusly :— in which last phrase I am borrowing again, with the true effrontery of a scribbler, from Artemus Ward—

MARY JANE,

THE WORDS BY ALFRED TENNYSON,

THE MUSIC BY BUNKUM BARRE,

DEDICATED TO AND SUNG BY

BOANERGES BULL.

Once Bunkum Barre did me the honour to set some words of mine, in which he failed, with the most faultless completeness, to catch a single idea out of those

with which my geniuskin of song had inspired me. "Most extraordinary thing," he said to me, conscious of his success. "I find that our popular composer, Herr Tutl Te (a mere impostor, my dear boy, I assure you), has set these same words of yours, as I think, in an inferior manner. But you will admit, my dear Tom, that the *rhythm is the same.*"

I looked at him feebly and humbly, and admitted that it was. As the "rhythm" depended on the words, I failed to see how it could be otherwise. Seeing that the wretched word-writer finds three things out of four, the ideas, words, and rhythm, and leaves the fourth, the tootling, to the composer, I never could see why he should be printed small and the composer big, and the two paid on a like scale of proportion. But such is the author's life, from time immemorial. He is the one man presumed to have no weekly bills. I have written songs, and the composer has composed everybody to sleep with them, and taken the cash and the big letters. I have written a play, and the actors have "made" me; and written another to be made again by some more of them; whereas where they have failed, which has not been unfrequent, to catch a single idea, or indeed, with

exceptions, to speak a single word of mine, they have been much commiserated for having to do with an author who handicapped their talents with such ideas and words. I have served for six months at hack-work, as hard as Jacob, for Skimpington the religious book-seller—might I not rather say, the seller of religious books?—and at the end been refused one penny in payment, on the ground that I had no "contract," not indeed being apt to make them in such relations. I have been driven to law for my money, and after a year and a half's delay got it from a judge and a jury, to be robbed of more than three-fourths of it immediately afterwards by that exquisite and rational product of British law, the taxing-master, who sits in a room of his own and placidly reverses, to all intent and purpose, the "judgment" and the "order" of Her Majesty's High Court of Justice, in the absence of the hapless, though successful litigant, who has spared every penny of avoidable expense, and is fined for succeeding. The taxing-master hath a villa in the wholesome suburb of Scurviton-on-Thames, and draws his unmolested income quarterly. And the religious book-seller lives in splendid opulence, and cares no straw whether he pays me what he owes me or not, provided I am duly

mulcted for venturing to annoy him, and wanting to be paid like other men. Oh, that he would sell fewer prayer-books, and read more! I like irreligious publishers much better, and find them indifferent honest.

This is digressive, and remote from Lestrange's song. The Count's wonderful voice, a rich tenor baritone, and refined musical skill were among his chief passports, as such gifts and acquirements are, and deserve to be, to social success. That success of his was great and immediate. He could talk with the best talkers, do innumerable services unobtrusively, and have the name of a "thorough gentleman" for the asking. So great was his musical gift, that at a concert where the best signors and mesdames of the day discoursed their most highly-paid songs, he would win from a frigid audience the one loud *encore* of the evening, by some simple, thrilling, perfect ballad, which set half who heard it dreaming, sung with an art beyond the reach of skill.

At last the professionals came to him with a sort of deputation, asking him to ask payment for singing among them, because it wasn't fair.

He thought of it for a time, but would not, having plans and notions of his own. And in the first blush of

his London success, he became an unfailing feature at the Vavasour receptions we have heard of; the right hand of Mr. Vavasour in the City, and, still more, of Mrs. Vavasour at home. She was his devotion.

When the cruel title came, he understood better than any one else how to soothe and soften Marian's bitter and bravely-hidden mortification. And when she and he came to Lady Pepperharrow's house-warming, it was from Luscombe Abbey that they came.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE PITY OF IT.

THE Count Lestrange's keen eye for beauty was held and fascinated by the first apparition of Daisy Fairfield. She was looking her loveliest on that evening at Lady Pepperharrow's, and we know the reason why. So did the Count at once, with an intuition which would hardly have failed a less keen observer than he was, when he saw her at Guy Faucit's side. She was very sweet and very fair, and he knew that he was in the presence of the most perfect specimen of her kind whom to his taste he had seen.

He set Pentonville to work at once, and through that well-qualified agent of social enquiries, he soon learned all he wanted to know.

The name came upon him with a surprise. "Miss Fairfield, the daughter of the merchant!" he said. "Really!"

This, then, was the girl about whom John Brent had spoken to him only that morning, as the young lady upon whom he had cast a favourable eye. Lestrange fairly laughed to himself, with an old silent laugh, as he thought the combination over.

Lady Luscombe's quick eye followed him with suspicion, and she asked him what was amusing him.

"I will tell you some day," he said; "or rather, it will tell itself before long. I see a plot in my mind's eye; and you know that I am fond of them."

He was introduced to Miss Fairfield that night, and he met her at dinner a few evenings afterwards, when that sad change had come over the spirit of her dream. He was courteous, sympathetic, watchful, and laid himself out to please. He did not altogether succeed at first, as well as usual; for there was something in the girl's royal instincts which took alarm. But he met her at a good time for his purposes, whatever those might be.

She was deeply wounded at Guy Faucit's departure without further sign, and inwardly resolved that he

could not have cared very much for her, after all, or he would never have taken her so instantly at her unwilling word. She missed his companionship though, painfully, not only as the lover's, but as the friend's; for all her talks with him had been an education to her, and had widened and enlarged her mind.

This gap Lestrange was more able to supply than any one else, for he was a man of wide culture, as well as of deep observation. He, too, was able to talk of art and books out of the overflowings of a fuller knowledge than Guy's; though the cynical flavour of his comments and criticisms, delicately veiled as it was, was very different from that of the discourse which came of Faucit's frank and open-air nature.

During the months of that London season,—during which poor Daisy, taken up by Lady Luscombe and others at once by right of her rare beauty, blossomed out into the great world with a canker-worm at the stem,—Lestrange had constant opportunities of "forming" the girl whom he adopted as his pupil.

Everything fought for him. The entire change of life and associates, in which she found the best distraction possible for her sad thoughts, made her glad of the attention of one who knew her new world so well.

Terribly sad those thoughts became within a few days of her father's scene with Guy. First, he told her that things in the City might recover; then, that it was only a question of time when the crisis should come; then, that she could save his fortune, his credit, and his character, and she alone; then, that she could save them but in one way; and, at last, that that way was John Brent.

Every step was taken with Machiavellian precision; for John Brent directed Mr. Fairfield, and Count Lestrange directed John Brent. Scarcely had he made Daisy's acquaintance, and understood Brent's purpose, than he determined to forward it with all his power.

I do not wish to examine too closely into the motives by which he was actuated, for they were mixed and many. Moreover, Lestrange was one of those terrible characters with whom one meets, thank God, very rarely, though one does meet with them sometimes, who love evil for evil's sake, and have made it their good. It is in itself motive enough for them. Such people are an awful scourge, perhaps a wholesome warning. Let no man speak of "dispositions." To them, as to all, the choice between good and evil is

open at the first; and when they have entered upon the downward course, constant and constant are the opportunities offered of return. Then constant less and less; and at last, none at all. Their perception of right and wrong has grown fairly confused; and their ears are no longer open that they should hear the passing of the sad, remorseful, sighing sentence, "Ephraim is joined to the idols. Let him alone:" or know of the irrevocable moment when it is passed, if indeed such a sentence can ever be irrevocable, which mercifully we cannot know, though it is well for us to fear it.

So the nets closed round Daisy Fairfield, for whom Count Lestrange had conceived a deep and dangerous admiration from the time when first he began to talk to her. The frank and fearless spirit, the entire absence of self-seeking, and comparative indifference even to admiration,—though she would have been less than woman if she had not enjoyed, even in her trouble of heart, the conquests of her beauty,—delighted Lestrange, who had grown weary of the monotony of worldliness which he found upon the surface wherever he went. Here was a task worthy of his power and skill, and in accordance with all the principles of the nature which he (and none else) had made his, to subject this

high-minded woman to a process of mental degradation. In the future he may have had other views.

The months which Guy spent by his mother's side in Devonshire, Lestrange devoted to this unworthy game. The world, at that time, affixed him much to Lady Luscombe, and for good reasons of his own he had to conciliate her. The adventurer's main purpose in life was very definite to himself, though unknown to all beside. From the first, he had made himself indispensable to Marian Vavasour, whom he magnetized at last into an entire and dangerous confidence. In her social empire he had been an admirable vizier; in her schemes for wealth he had brought all his craft and mastery of city politics to bear in helping her. Marian Vavasour had told him a fact which was concealed from every one else in the world but the family physician. Her husband had serious heart-disease, and his life was of short purchase. The Count Lestrange knew well what she and he might do together with the gathering rent-roll of the Luscombe lands, and he meant to marry the widow of Lord Luscombe.

It may give a better idea than anything can of the admiration he conceived for the beauty and the nature

of Daisy, to say, that for the moment she shook him in that intention. Daisy Fairfield would have a good fortune, which he could save, with her father's credit, through John Brent, as well as the Anglo-Indian himself. And as his wife she would do the Count credit indeed. But a little reflection cured him of that idea. The position which Marian Luscombe would give him, and the peculiar fitness which he recognized in her and in himself, to make them an important place in the English world, was a matter which he was not going to throw lightly away. So for his further objects he decided to second John Brent's purposes, and not to thwart him. In this he congratulated himself upon a good disinterested action. For what else could it be, to save such a girl as Daisy from ruin and obscurity, and the shame which would result from her father's exposure, and probably his public trial, by the only means left by which to save her? So he went upon his way. Drop by drop he instilled into her ear at the many parties, dinners, gatherings at which they met, the theories of life which for the moment it suited him to entertain. He said no word to her of his knowledge of her father's position, and the designs of Mr. Brent.

"Yes, Miss Fairfield," he said to her once, "like

others I have formed my conception of duty. As far as in this world we can understand it, I think that it is to family and to name. Self-sacrifice for that is the highest point to which we can rise."

"Do you really think that?" she said.

"I do," he answered. "I am myself my own architect, such as the building is; and I think myself bound to honour the building."

"And if self-sacrifice, in such a cause, meant misery and wrong?"

"I should hold it to be all the higher self-sacrifice."

And Daisy thought, and thought again.

Lestrange was far too clever a player to intimate to the girl anything of personal admiration, which could be construed into anything more than personal deference. Too clever far to use the ordinary common-places about the value of wealth and station to such a pupil as this, he played upon the chords of the higher common-places of sacrifice and unselfishness. He used the general ways of worldlings in his subtle and suggestive fashion, not for example, but for mockery. And so by degrees, studied and sure, he undermined the foundation of a higher and a nobler faith.

Daisy Fairfield, meanwhile, became the favourite of

the hour, and the recognized Cynthia of the fashionable minute. She clung to good Lady Pepperharrow with a despairing fondness, as she felt the ground slipping more and more from under her feet. She used her own new born fashion to help her friend to the desire of her heart; figured as Diana Vernon at her *tableaux;* as Mrs. Mildmay, or Madame de Fontanges, at her private theatricals—nobody ever acted anything but 'Still Waters Run Deep,' or 'Plot and Passion' just then—willingly and carelessly enough. It was her first step into the public life from which she had rather shrunk before, and surprised her hostess as much as it gratified her. The rouge and the applause had been little enough to her taste; but she did not reject it now.

"You acted like an angel, dear," said Lady Pepperharrow, after one of these performances.

"Very likely," she answered. "I never saw an angel act. But not nearly as well as any half-trained professional actress from the theatres would do it, on a salary of fifteen shillings a week."

"Oh, but, my dear, ladies have such an advantage."

"As professional ladies, of course. But not as professional actresses."

And Lady Pepperharrow, without at all under-

standing it, recognized in her favourite's talk and her favourite's ways a tone entirely new to her. She asked once or twice what had become of that nice and distinguished Mr. Faucit, who had seemed such a friend of Daisy's. But she had but off-hand answers, and knew nothing. So Daisy laughed and talked and dined, and the wheel went round and round.

One day,—it was late in the season, and some two days before Guy Faucit's mother died at his side in Devonshire,—Faucit's name was accidentally brought up in conversation at some small and familiar dinner-party, by some one who knew of him. Daisy bit her lip a little, and turned a little white; and Lestrange, who was sitting next her, filled her glass with wine, or beckoned to the servants to do so.

"Faucit!" he said. "Oh yes, I remember him. A fine, manly fellow, who was to carry everything before him. Did you ever meet him, Miss Fairfield?"

"Once or twice," she said.

"A fine career spoiled," he added, "like so many others. I met him at supper once or twice three or four months ago, at the house of the pretty singer, Dora Lane. He was her favourite and slave for the time, and I fancy the Temple Chambers didn't see very

much of him. Most men would have been proud of it; but whatever his reasons were, he didn't like it talked about. The thing was kept rather dark, though it was well enough known in some circles."

He looked away from Daisy, and talked to his other neighbour.

Daisy was brilliant, almost noisy that night; and she went home late. Her father was still in his room, and the inevitable crisis was near. There had been scenes at home of late; the idler, Dick Fairfield, had come back, and with father and mother, was pressing Daisy hard; for even the poor mother knew the truth, and was fading under it, as Fairfield himself was breaking.

"Papa," said Daisy, "tell Mr. Brent I will marry him." And so she went to bed.

The next day she had her interview with the unlovely lover, and made, on her side, no disguise. His face was unlovelier than ever when the interview was over, and the terms of the bargain on both sides arranged. Daisy's was a frank and unconventional spirit, and she held her own. Whatever her terms were, Brent yielded, and the cruel thing was done. I have told my thoughts before, and do not love to linger.

There was a wedding at St. George's in the following autumn, when Guy Faucit was upon the high seas. I had myself just come home, and heard the startling news; and I watched the ceremony, uninvited, from the gallery of the church. The face of the bride was like a statue of Diana, as pale as the marble—as classical—as cold. Throughout the mockery, no quiver of a nerve might be seen. Only, when she was asked if she would love, and honour, and obey, there was a pause before she answered. Then she said in a low voice, "I will," and suddenly lifted her eyes, with a strange appeal in them, for a moment straight above her. And I, who was watching her and naught beside, saw her, with one rapid gesture, make the sign of the cross.

It was rumoured that the fashionable priest, one of the two or three who was close to her, heard her whisper under her breath—"Thy will be done."

For myself, I went home dreaming, and sate out that evening at some theatre in a dream. I have never been able to remember either theatre or play.

CHAPTER XIX.

DAISY BRENT WASHES HER HANDS.

THE marriage was over, and the deed was done; and when the Magnibonium catastrophe came, the good fame of Mr. Fairfield escaped all connection with it: so Daisy reaped her reward. But in less than one year from that day, she was without father or mother, the first of whom followed the second to the grave within a few weeks. The long anxiety had killed them both; and the cold duty which in Daisy's manner to them now took the place of the old signs of love, perhaps hastened the inevitable end. She could not help that change. Mrs. Fairfield grew smaller and smaller, and faded out: and her husband, much changed on his side, less dictatorial and gentler far, was found after dinner one evening dead in his arm-chair. He had died quietly and painlessly in his sleep.

Daisy had been dining with him that night, and was the first to find him so, when the usual time had passed for his coming up-stairs for his cup of tea.

"Papa!" she said. "Papa!"

Then as the silence awed her she drew nearer, and looked at him, and knew that he was dead. She stood by the chair quietly for some time, neither moving nor speaking, but looking into his face, with the sadness of an unfathomable feeling in her eyes. Then she bent over him and kissed the dead lips, which wore, thank God, a smile; and then she knelt and prayed. She felt for any sign of life, but there was none; and quietly called the servants. The doctor came and certified that he must have been some half-an-hour dead when his daughter found him, and discoursed to his wife constantly for months of the impression made upon his mind by the stately sweetness and self-possession which the daughter showed. She looked at her father, he said, with an expression in her eyes which haunted him, and was always tempting him to try to define it.

So Septimus Fairfield's life was over; and he had escaped the dishonour and ruin which had seemed to him so terrible, at the heavy cost of this young and vigorous life, full of the bud and sap of its richest

spring. He had lived out his days in their narrow-minded span, as such men do live them; and nobody had much to say of him for good or for evil. His interpretation of the fifth commandment had been like that of most elder people—all on one side.

It is a deep conception of duty which gratifies the vanity of the old, and saves them trouble, and casts all the burdens on the young. When they moralize on the point, it is impossible but to believe that they think of themselves as having married not to please themselves at all, but in order to place a possible progeny under heavy obligations in no wise mutual. The progeny are apt to think otherwise during their early years. Then they grow old in their turn, and go and do likewise. And so the undying tradition of self is handed on again—to yet a generation more.

With reference to this same commandment, it may perhaps be suggested that most of us do not live under the dispensation of Moses; and that it is not that commandment upon which, according to Him under whose dispensation we are, hang all the law and the prophets.

Septimus Fairfield, like most people, had interpreted the commandment in the sense most gratifying to himself, and did not seem to think, so far as his

children were concerned, that it even included his poor timid wife much. "Honour thy father" was enough for him without the context; and he certainly took no trouble to teach respect for Mrs. Fairfield by any example of his own. What his lessons lacked, Daisy's heart supplied. And to save himself in the eyes of the world, which had done little for him and paid scant attention to him or his doings, Papa Juggernaut drove his parental car right over his gallant child's happiness and life; and before he had time to profit by his drive, went to his rest apparently with a Nelson's confidence that he had done his duty. Who knows? Puzzled and perplexed by all these myriad problems of the entangled scheme of Self, we are tempted to write over half these monumental graves Ophelia's single epitaph—

> "He is gone, he is gone,
> And we cast away moan;
> God ha' mercy on his soul."

"And of all Christian souls, I pray God." Many of these leaden caskets may carry yet, locked within them, some rough gem of Christian soulhood, all unguessed, still proper for the refiner's hand, as Bassanio's casket hid Portia's image. What good had poor old Polonius,

in the comedy of his philosophic selfishness which wrought to such an end, ever in his life done to anybody?

Daisy Brent went home to her husband's house, to take up her cross alone. She went to him a portionless bride in reality, though it was supposed that she had brought him a handsome contribution from the Fairfield salvage, when the house was comfortably wound up to be a record of the mercantile past, though something, as has been already told, to the temporary discomfort of the junior partner. As a matter of fact, nothing was really saved, except a modest bachelor's income, which, by arrangement between the contracting parties, went to keep the wolf from the door of subaltern Dick's quarters, and to enable him to live—when after a time the military profession proved too severe a trial for his capacities—the blameless life of self-sufficing clubhood.

Such men be the lotos-eaters of our day, in whose land it is always afternoon because they never get up in the morning, though to eat with them is to nip, and their lotos is called sherry-and-bitters.

John Brent had really got all the Fairfield money into his own hands, and in his short-sighted selfishness,

he wrung from Daisy's father every doit of his bond. It was concealed from Daisy, who believed that she really brought money in her hand to her husband; for it was not difficult to hide the truth from so innocent a financier as she was. John Brent imagined that by taking her portionless he would have her more completely in his power, and he looked forward with satisfaction, the brute, even at the very hour of his marriage, to telling his wife some day that he had taken her as a pauper. Most short-sighted was this selfishness of his, which left out of sight altogether the whims of the goddess Fortune, never so whimsical as with wealth of such precarious making. The Fairfield business might have pointed that moral for him; but he had no eyes to read. It had been his purpose to retire altogether from business; but business had been his life, and he soon began to realize that it was as impossible for him to do without it, as it is for nearly all men, lawyers, doctors, anybody, to give up a profession and to die out of harness. The few who can do it are exceptionally fortunate men, who have managed, however absorbing the nature of their especial work, to keep in view the infinite varieties, and interests, and fascinations of life, and to retain a hold, for their

declining years, upon the rich resources of leisure, which is likely, through the law of revulsion, to become before long the highest good of these worrisome days. I who write these things avow my simple belief, that there is nothing in life so delightful as intelligent idleness, even as there is nothing so terrible as "loafing" where idleness is, but intelligence is not.

Now John Brent, it must be confessed, knew nothing of these possibilities, and was in sooth the veriest and narrowest little huckster who ever scratched himself up a fortune. His married home was wretched, for wherever he went he made his own wretchedness, and that of all he had to do with. It was in spite of all that the brave Daisy could do;—doing all her duty fearlessly, and striving her best to keep, subject to the conditions of her sale, to the terms of the memorable and specially attested vow. I, for one, hold not that she ever broke it. For, without any Jesuitic reservation, we may supply before the words of any such an oath as that, even as before those of that same fifth commandment, the introductory clause "to try our best." And when the other side makes more impossible, so much the worse—for the other side. Try—and when you have failed through no fault of yours, know it; and

try again at the first opportunity possible, till the case has become "no thoroughfare," and you can wash your hands. It was in this wise that, after four years of loyal battle, Daisy Brent washed her hands at last.

Sad and cruel and violent had been many of the domestic scenes which characterized those four years of domestic history. Mr. Brent became engaged again in the labyrinth of business, and his wife, patronized by Lady Luscombe and tutored by the Count Lestrange, blossomed into the dangerous honour of a fashionable married beauty. It is the old story which wants small re-telling, though I hate to think of Daisy as its heroine. Society adopted her as a queen,—petted, and *fêted*, and pictured her,—and scandal busied herself with her name, though as little, perhaps, as scandal ever did with any of its victims. She knew it, and she shrugged her shoulders, and she went her way. What other way was open to her? I do not know. Her warm friendship for Lady Pepperharrow continued unabated, and Lady Pepperharrow's house became a recognized centre of the whole frivolous world of London, dashed with much of the attractive and unfrivolous, for the hostess still retained her admiration for "genius" in its fullest power, and genius at Glycerine

House, or at the country house in Hertfordshire which was afterwards added to it, was as plentiful as caller herrin' after a good haul, some with soft roe, and some with hard. Gradually, slowly, surely, Daisy's character deteriorated and hardened in its outward and visible signs, though after events were to prove the tenacity of the inward and spiritual grace.

Mr. Brent occupied the position which husbands in such cases are content to hold; and, like such husbands, liked it, while he snarled at it. The liking was of course reserved for others; the snarling for his wife. Nobody, be it said, ever ventured to say much to Daisy in disparagement of Daisy's husband; for, with a touch of the old masterhood, she put such venture down. She had many struggles with herself. She might have turned *dévote;* but it was not in her, and she could not feign, especially in matters such as that. So she kept her own counsel in her utter solitude of heart; and tried once or twice to kindle in her brother some spark of loving sympathy, but failed. There are few people so apt, unhappily, to fail utterly under real stress of heart as those of one's own kindred. There are few, I am afraid, so prompt to desertion, so quick at commonplace, so (unwittingly, perhaps) irresponsive to

the chords and cries of feeling. Water is thicker than blood, in nine cases out of ten. Daisy's brother was the last thing left to her, and he was a reed that broke at the first handling. Thanks to his keen intelligence and subtle power of purpose, she found her best resource in the talk and the companionship of Count Lestrange; and gradually, softly, surely, he undermined the faiths and loyalties of her life.

At home, Mr. John Brent proved himself a past master of the infamous art of "nagging," which has wrecked so many homes. Like the dropping water which wears out the stone, it is the most merciless of processes, as it is the most difficult to detect. It is an art, sedulously cultivated. Its special delight is to find out the weak points in the sufferer's armour, to insult his or her special prejudices, to calumniate his or her special friends, to exaggerate and to dwell upon, to others as well as to the victim, his or her especial weaknesses, or to invent them when they exist not. When some explosion has taken place under its influence, the victim is powerless to point out the particular wound; and on "the facts" is condemned by the Vehmgericht of kinsmanship as having been guilty of temper, or quarrel, or anything easy to say, and

economic of trouble to themselves. And he or she—for masculine or feminine may be the victim—is driven to ask self the question if self is wrong, and its own senses and eyes are to be believed. After reiterated proof it knows and acquits itself, and goes on its way in isolated scorn. So by degrees it came to be with Daisy.

John Brent was under a restraint with his wife under which he fretted, fumed, and stormed, to as much purpose as a small pool jumping at a hundred feet of rock. Thanks to her, he was in a position which he had not anticipated for himself. Mr. Brent's dinners became famous, and he officiated as the figure-head, a position which he had meant her to occupy.

Instead of Mr. Brent's wife, the world only spoke of Mrs. Brent's husband. Still, the world came; and the house in Curzon Street was renowned for the aristocratic contents of the hansoms which waited at its door.

Once, a distant cousin of Daisy's, who had an affection for her, came up from the country at some pains to see her; but only reached the house to find an empty hansom at the door, and to hear that etiquette forbade her to be received, because some great personage was paying a visit. The country-girl went home disappointed, and puzzled about etiquette; and Daisy

lost the chance of a friend who might have forgotten the ties of kindred, and been a friend indeed, when a friend was most wanted. She might have risen higher than the kindred conception of Christianity—"Don't bother me." But the opportunity was lost.

Four years after that ill-omened marriage, the crisis came. As he had done by others, others had done by him. Mr. Brent was outwitted and out-generalled in the tactics of speculation, into which he had been completely drawn; and he found one morning that he had to begin the world again.

While his alarms about this had lasted, he had been to his wife unremittingly and basely cruel; and, bravely as she fought on, had almost fretted her into a nervous illness. She started at night, dreamed miserably, grew thin, anxious, worn, heart-broken almost, under his constant persecution. And alas, and alas! her chief comforter and sole confidant was Lestrange, whose serpentine consolations were a very mint of evil.

Husband and wife were alone together one day, when he told her, brutally, that he was ruined. She remembered how her father, too, had once had the same story to tell; and she looked at him in wonder.

"How long have you known that this was coming?"

she asked. "Ruin doesn't come in a moment, as I have learned before."

"I have expected it for some weeks," he snarled.

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Why should I?"

"It was your simple duty," she said. "I have not failed in mine to you."

"Not failed!" he answered, with a brutal laugh. "What sort of wife have you been to me? You have deceived me from the first to the last."

"I never deceived any one," she said calmly.

Then he burst into a bitter storm of taunt and anger,—insulted her with the gossip of society, vowed she had dragged his name into the dirt,—while she bore it with an unflinching and unmeasured scorn. Then, when he thought, in his perception of character, that by this manly course he had worked upon her to his purposes, he told her that she could save him.

"I again!" she said. "Am I to be always saving men who ruin themselves by gambling, and those who belong to them too? You cannot be ruined either, for you have my money."

"Yours, you pauper!" he said.

Then he told her of the truth she had not known

till then, and threw it as another insult in her face. The man was half beside himself with evil rage, and furious with his wife's sovereign calm, unshaken still, though every jot of colour had left her face, save for the light which sparkled in her eyes.

Then he confessed his scheme, some trick he had contrived for a post-nuptial settlement, which only wanted her consent to place them in comfortable security. Of course she would give it, he said; but she very simply declined.

"I can give you no help to defraud your creditors," she said. "If you had not been so anxious to rob me when I married you, you would not have been in this difficulty now. But even had you not, I would rather give up every penny I had, than help you in such a scheme as this. I can go out and work now."

"Work—you? Where?" And he laughed more savagely than before.

"I don't know. On the stage perhaps; they say that I can act:—or anywhere."

"Can't you get some of your lovers to help you?" he sneered. "You must have made a pretty private purse by this time."

At last the true blood rose, and the true face flushed crimson.

I cannot dwell on what followed; but within five minutes after that infamous word was said, John Brent had done something which I cannot name; and Daisy, a red mark burning on her shoulder under her gown, had dressed herself to go down to Lady Pepperharrow's, and passed out of that shameful husband's life for evermore.

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CHAPTER XX.

JOHN BRENT DEPARTS.

Daisy Brent threw herself into Lady Pepperharrow's arms in a tempest of shame, passion, and tears, the stronger for its long repression, and told her everything. She was past silence with such a sterling friend and kindly woman now.

"What was she to do?" she said. Did Lady Pepperharrow think that she was qualified to teach, that her skill in music or drawing was sufficient for such a purpose?

All Lady Pepperharrow's kindness and sympathy, all her personal affection for Daisy, and her resentment at such evil as this, came to the front at once. She failed to see that it mattered the least what became of Mr. John Brent, to his wife or to anybody. "Oh, my dear!

if you had only married that nice Mr. Faucit, as I once thought you would! But people never do marry the right people now-a-days."

Poor Daisy's heart felt as if a hand had gripped it, and choked her with a sob. Daisy's schemes of teachership her friend scattered to the winds. She was to come and make her home with her at once, and be to her the daughter she had so longed for all her life. What better use could she find for some of all the money which she so honestly devoted to the engagements and amusements of others, than to make her darling Daisy its steward? She had guessed a great deal of her unhappiness with her husband, though it had been loyally concealed to the best of Daisy's power. Daisy, after some discussion of the point, could not find it in her heart to refuse such a welcome refuge after all these storms, so frankly and lovingly offered. Everything kind that her heart could prompt her to say, of the old days, of the old chaperoning, of the old home in Portland Place, and of the girl's father and mother, Lady Pepperharrow poured out in a torrent, kissing and comforting Daisy all the time, and crying over and soothing her. If there was anybody nearly as fond of Daisy as herself, it was her Sir Hugh; and he was as unfeignedly

delighted as his wife when the new daughter took her permanent place at the table, at which she had always been so welcome. She would see him suddenly nodding and smiling at her, from the peaceful recesses of his chair coaxing her to a glass of champagne, which he thought was a panacea in trouble. And as time went on, Daisy Fairfield, after some months of quiet and seclusion, became again the star of the world in which she moved, under the shelter of the Pepperharrows' home.

Two or three days after their separation, John Brent wrote to his wife a miserable, whining, appealing letter, in the hope of inducing her to reconsider her determination not to accede to his wishes about the settlement, for which there was still time. He apologized for his conduct to her in an abject way, which made things worse, as such people have a habit of apologizing. He had been so driven, so harried, so wretched, etc., etc. Then he went on to find the scapegoat for his offences, as in such cases usual also; and to Daisy's astonishment and indignation, he laid everything on the Count Lestrange. Lestrange, he said, had been his confidant and agent throughout in the matter of his marriage; Lestrange it was who had prevented him

from rescuing her father; and Lestrange who had since drawn him into fresh and dangerous speculations, and constantly insinuated into his ear, in a manner which he could scarcely trace, ill-reports about Daisy.

Lestrange was at Lady Pepperharrow's, as it happened, on the afternoon of the day when this letter was received. Daisy, in her straightforward fashion, called him aside and read him the passages out of it which concerned him. Lestrange asked if he might look at the letter, merely raising his eyebrows. Daisy showed him the last pages. Lestrange read them to himself, smiling a little, and raising his eyebrows rather higher. Then he gave the letter back, looked thoughtfully down, then said very courteously, and in a tone of interest and hesitation,

"Mrs. Brent—excuse me; but—is your husband quite right in his mind?"

"Count Lestrange!" she said.

"Surely it is rather charitable to think he is not. Why in the world should I have prevented him from saving your father? why in the world should I have wanted him to marry a woman like yourself? why in the world should I have insinuated to him ill-reports about you?. There is always a grain of truth in this

sort of thing; and no doubt I have had, in the City and before that in India, some business relations with Mr. Brent, as I have with most people. But really I have too much to do to occupy myself with drawing him into fresh and dangerous speculations. Why in the name of the monument should I do that, when obviously it profiteth me nothing? 'Whys' are the strongest of arguments. Excuse me, Mrs. Brent, but I am rather surprised, knowing me as you do, that you even spoke to me of such a letter."

She looked at him thoughtfully, and took it back from him, and was moving it to and fro in her right hand as she answered him, in a low voice—

"Because, Count, knowing you as I do, I have never been able to trust you."

"Why not?" he asked, as quietly.

"I don't know," she answered.

"Do you consider that quite fair?"

"I don't know. Perhaps not."

"I suppose I might be offended with other people if they said so," he said in a thoughtful tone; "but somehow, not with you. It strikes me that if I had acted in any interest of my own, I should have been more likely to cross Mr. Brent's desires than to forward

them, if I had known anything in the world about them."

"'Whys' are the strongest of arguments. Why?"

"Surely you must know how very deeply I admire you," he said. He said it after a moment's hesitation, with a respect in his manner so absolute that no woman could possibly have quarrelled with it, when he offered it as a defence which she herself had invited. "Your marriage with Mr. Brent was a hard trial to me," he added at once in the same tone, and then instantly changed the subject to some everyday topic with a tact which was above praise, and in spite of herself, made Daisy like him better than she ever had before.

No man, she felt, could have behaved better, or freed himself more completely from a charge at which he might justly have taken offence. She dismissed John Brent's letter from her mind with an infinite contempt, her knowledge of him, unhappily, allowing her to attribute it not to any alienation of mind, but to what she had detected him in a hundred times, the contemptible vice of habitual lying, especially where harm is to be done by it to anybody else. When one has fairly found them out, sinners in this kind must be let

alone. It is idle to contradict them, for if you do they sprout up again in a new place like the Hydra's heads. Let them alone; and the heads knock each other's brains out, like the cats of Kilkenny.

Lestrange knew this weakness of Brent's well enough; and like the boy who cried wolf, the wretched Anglo-Indian was justly served by being utterly disbelieved when by accident he said what was true. Justly served, too, thought Daisy, and with that wondrous equality of justice of which even in the world's punishments we have so many examples, in losing his fortune as he had robbed her father's, punished where he had sinned.

Lestrange only made one more allusion to the letter. "If I had committed a villainy as complicated as Iago's, with even less reason, Mrs. Brent," he said, "there would be something somewhere to convict me of it." Of course there was not.

What did happen, however, was an interview between the Count and Brent, which had the witness of a clerk, and half palsied the little wretch with fear. He had never guessed before what anger meant, in that impassive man, or how dangerous could seem such impassive anger.

"I do not easily forgive people who insult me,

Mr. Brent," Lestrange said. "How dared you tell that tissue of falsehoods about me to your wife?"

"What?" screamed the wretched Brent.

"That tissue of falsehoods, sir," answered the other. "Is it not enough that you should have made yourself notorious for your cowardly and brutal treatment of that lady, just when you were on the verge of ruin from these City tricks of yours, that you should venture to slander a man of my character and position?"

"Slander! slander!" writhed Brent. "But it was all true."

"What?" said Lestrange. And he called the clerk in, who was listening already, and nearly tumbled into the room as the glass door was opened in the office which Brent had set up in the City. "I shall require an apology from you for that, written under your own hand, unless you produce instant proof of your calumnious statements about me."

The wretched Brent was like the bird under the snake's charm, and was mastered very soon. Lestrange mixed comfort with his menace, and showed Brent that he had an admirable opening in his old house at Calcutta to begin life over again, even at his age, if he would take his, Lestrange's, advice, and the assistance

which, with his influence, he could give him over there, to begin the rebuilding of his fortunes. He could, as it happened, find a place for him at Calcutta worth six hundred a-year, for which his practice and experience would especially qualify him. It would give him, too, plenty of opportunities to scrape a competence together again, if no more.

Brent, who had contemplated ruin, began to whine on the new key of gratitude to his benefactor, and acceded to the two conditions demanded.

The first was, that he should sign his positive denial of the statements he had made to Daisy. So contemptuous was Lestrange upon this matter, that Brent himself began to mistrust his own senses and memory, and signed in the presence of the clerk, who signed too. The second was, that he should by deed transfer to Daisy half of his annual six hundred to place her above dependence.

Here was cause for new rebellion; but Lestrange pointed out how soon the Indian income would increase in his hands, and again spoke with lofty scorn of Brent's treatment of his wife; to him, he said, the noblest woman he had seen. And Brent acceded to everything, and sailed for India unregretted by a dog;

and the clerk described the scene, and Lestrange's magnificent conduct, to his mates and peculiars; and in course of time Daisy knew that, in return for her unjustifiable suspicion of him, Lestrange had spoken for her in a way not usual with him, had found a competence for her husband, and for herself enough to prevent her from feeling a mere dependent even in her dear friend's house, against which the high spirit would have soon rebelled; and had read with her own eyes her wretched husband's witnessed retractation of all that he had said of Lestrange. And so it was that the strange Count became more and more the guardian, guide, philosopher, and friend of this hard-tried woman.

CHAPTER XXI.

CHECK TO THE COUNT.

Not very long after the events told of in the last chapter, happened one which caused much talk and excitement in the world in which these characters of my story moved. I have spoken of the peculiar ties which connected Marian Vavasour, in the days of her social supremacy, with Count Lestrange. Before the time of her luckless ennoblement nobody ever dreamed of speaking of the intimacy more than as a strong case of mutual friendship and liking, and Lestrange was merely regarded as a familiar intimate at the statesman's house, versed in its ways, and useful to both host and hostess. The growth of the intimacy was so gradual, so unmarked the steps by which the attitude of Lestrange towards Mrs. Vavasour grew into one of almost exclusive social devotion, that the world was very long before it could

hint anything ill-natured of an alliance which had been so slow and open of formation.

As long as Mr. Fulke Vavasour's political position remained to him, and his wife's drawing-rooms continued to be the acknowledged centre for the political world, scandal was a powerless factor in the matter. If Lestrange wove in his head the scheme about the Vavasours of which I have spoken in another chapter; if in making himself more and more essential to them both, he never left his purpose out of sight,—he was above all things determined not in any way to compromise the lady, or allow his name to be prematurely coupled with hers, in any shape or form. Nothing could have been less favourable to the fulfilment of that ambition of his than any untimely catastrophe, or even rumour, which could in any way prejudice the social position which was the lady's,—which he meant to be his own.

That crafty purpose of his once slowly formed, he could make no false move in playing his game as indeed he had begun it for a smaller stake, before he knew how much might depend upon the issue. From the moment when he first made the acquaintance, of the Vavasours, he saw that in their house were the

chances to be found of making for himself the influential position which it was his ambition to hold in England, apart and away from the smaller diplomacies and intrigues which had made up his interesting but less distinguished career. He was in no hurry, for he believed in the preservation of his own youth; and if, like a distinguished man of our time, he had said that he "wanted to be prime minister," he might have betrayed something of his inner thought. But he never said what he wanted, and nobody ever knew. Gradually, in Mr. Vavasour's house, he succeeded, through a careful use of his own social gifts and subtleties, in paving the way to his destined goal. He became intimate with the springs of official life, to which the circumstances of his first introduction to London had given him his first access; he became favoured of ministers and trusted of officials, less in the City and more in Downing Street, and worked upon his way.

He might have found a seat in Parliament more than once, but with it he would have lost many of the secret opportunities for influence, which were the object on which his heart was set for the purpose of the hour. When he did enter Parliament, as it was his intention to do, he wanted to be safe, and to enter it as a man

with his way smoothed and made; he wanted to enter it on the winning side, after one of those crises of popular feeling when the people, having enough of one lot, give the other a turn, and the "national palaver" starts on a new tack in different hands, and reverses the policy of its predecessors, or says it does, before the eyes of an admiring crowd.

The Horatians, say, have had a seven or fourteen years' lease of office; and the Curiatians are justly tired of it. The lawyers on the Curiatian benches, especially, are growing clamorous for the loaves and fishes on which the Horatian advocates are waxing fat and kicking, while themselves are fed on the bread and water of opposition. It is at last discovered, therefore, that the honour of the country is in danger in Horatian hands. Her fair fame is being tarnished by oppression abroad, where struggling and subject nationalities look in vain to the land which was once their pole-star for guidance, for sympathy, and for aid. The old landmarks of right and wrong, which should be the one guidance of peoples for evermore, are becoming obliterated; and, unless the Curiatians come at once to the helm, England is practically lost. The Horatians, in and out of season assured that they are wicked men, to

whose darkened minds truth is a fable, and honour an unknown quality, become at last badgered and irritated into standing it no longer, and appeal to the country to tell them whether they are wicked men or not. The Curiatian leaders rush from hustings to hustings, appeal to Scripture and to Hampden and the rights of men, and to the glorious records of the Curiatian past; for every Horatian measure, which has done any good to the people, has been, as all the world knows, passed under Curiatian pressure.

Their burning words inflame the people, and wake them to a spirit of crusade against wickedness in general. Even quiet and thoughtful men of letters or of science catch the infection in their studies, forget the eternal law of the cobbler and his last, and rush on to platforms and into committees, much to the detriment of their wives' and children's pockets, to contribute their driblets to the ocean of talk, fairly taken in by the Curiatian moralities, and anticipating an instant dawning of the golden age. The mighty resurrection of all the goodnesses prevails. The people of England come to the hustings in flocks, and emphatically declare virtue is lord, and that the Horatians are wicked men.

All is over. There is much grinning like a dog, and running to and fro in the cities. The Horatians depart from the up-platform of Windsor by one train while the Curiatians enter the down by another. The Horatians, who had arrived each with a portfolio under his arm (which to the popular notion suggests something in the nature of a photographic album), depart with the evening newspaper in its place; and in the mysterious recesses of Windsor the albums are handed over to the Curiatians, who on their return to the station display them to the populace with pride.

It is done, and virtue reigns. Then the triumphal Curiatians change their note as fast as they possibly can. They withdraw their accusations of immorality with anxious zeal, disclaiming for their most ferocious utterances anything but a Pickwickian meaning. If there is one thing, they feel with pride, for which all English statesmen are distinguished, it is the high-minded and disinterested earnestness with which each and all of them labour for the good of the people of England, according to their honest views of right. No men have ever been more remarkable for this than the late Horatian government, however mistaken their policy may have been. If in the heat of conflict hard

words may have been used, it is now time to forget them. The country has discovered, to their credit be it spoken, that the abilities of honourable gentlemen opposite were not commensurate with their lofty principles, and if the Curiatian brains be of a superior cast, after all that is not the fault of the Horatians.

The Horatians, meanwhile, are not much conciliated, being a good deal angry at having been called so many bad names, and sent to the wall thereby. So they fail at first to see that it is time to forget everything on the spot in a friendly way; and as soon as the Curiatians set to work, or rather before they have had time to do anything, they begin to call names too. The Curiatians find themselves *tu-quoquéd*, and taxed with vicious and unpatriotic conduct, before they have been guilty of any conduct at all. They beg the country to wait, and the country, serenely confident of its millennium, does. The "national palaver" braces itself for legislation; and in the very first speeches of the Curiatian chiefs the country detects a new and very different ring. We must conciliate, we must diplomatize, we must be Pickwickian, we must nurse the prejudices of majorities and minorities. Then out of the blue cometh a bolt; and the country, who had

really begun to believe in a new era for the oppressed, and in a bolder vindication of the higher moralities as the stronghold of political battle, find that the reign of the strong has begun again indeed; that if the Horatians scourged the weak nationalities with whips the Curiatians will do it with scorpions; that, by whatever rule Russia and Austria are to be judged towards Poland and Hungary, England, Lord bless us, is quite another thing; that to throw away English money abroad is in Curiatian eyes the be-all and end-all of Horatian crime; and that for these same much-professing Curiatians, despotism, like charity, begins at home.

In the palaver, however, the world is in a tale, and poor deluded old Demos, so much flattered and appealed to a few months before, is told to mind his own business, for discipline is good for him. The misguided man of letters or of science, deserted, angry, powerless, gets him back to his study and exchanges indignant letters with his friends, and wonders what and how soon the end of this world-doomed imperialism is to be, at present all the worse, seemingly, in the stronger hands. For verily the imperialism of the Horatians to that of their conquering rivals, is as a procession at

Astley's to a charge of cavalry. The people of England, patient and quiet always, hold their tongues in mortified silence, and leave meetings and agitations, for the most part, to the mere froth of the thing. But they think as much and talk as little, as the noisier section think little and talk much. And they wait for the next battle at the polls, when they are deaf to Curiatian thunder, and stay at home. And amid a blare of town-bands and triumphal articles, history proclaims to the world a new "Horatian reaction." Even so, until the time be ripe—

> "Fu vera historia? ai posteri
> L'ardua sentenza."

Count Lestrange was waiting for some such crisis as this, as best calculated to bring out his powers, and acquiring meanwhile a full and cautious mastery of the geography of the political chess-board. But no man knows everything; and he was astray in his calculations when he placed his chief dependence upon his position with the Vavasours.

Mr. Vavasour's bald head, irreproachable dignity, and exceeding reticence, did not impose upon Lestrange himself, but they imposed upon him indirectly. He believed in their effect upon Mr. Vavasour's colleagues

as well as upon the world, which regarded him as a type of the hard-working and self-effacing statesman, who acts while others talk. His close attention to details, and interminable though lofty fussiness, carried out the illusion in the official world; and it was regarded as certain that on the next right-about of parties Mr. Vavasour, then in opposition, would hold an especial post for which the public voice designated him.

There was a hustle and a crisis; a vote of confidence in Ministers carried by a narrow majority, and an appeal to the country, which responded by saying that it had even less confidence than the Commons, and incontinently turned them out.

Lestrange did not feel sure, at the time of this election, which way the popular wind really blew, and he waited to be sure.

But when the new ministry was formed, the catastrophe occurred which has before been told of, and Mr. Vavasour was told off, album-less, to the Lords.

The blow to Lestrange was as great as it was to Marian. He was to have been Mr. Vavasour's right-hand man in his new political office; indeed, it is no secret from the all-knowing chronicler, that the expressions about struggling nationalities, and oppression

abroad, and other similar manifestoes, embodied in the election addresses of John Audley Vavasour to his constituents, were the well-balanced periods of Lestrange's pen, which was accustomed to sift everything to its smallest, and in its briefest and most pointed form to set it forth.

He had kept well with both sides in the official world; but his great stake had been set upon Vavasour, with whose party he saw shrewdly enough that the coming mastery in the game lay. That party in office, it was quite understood that the new minister would do his best to further the parliamentary ambitions of his shrewd ally, and to find the money which, even in these degenerate days, can still, though less openly than of old, purchase in some instances senatorial honours. He certainly owed the Count, in consideration of City services rendered to his income, the fullest price of a very safe seat indeed.

Lestrange had seen through the innate dulness of his patron as well as Marian Vavasour herself; and sedulously had the two laboured together, in alliance unconfessed even to themselves, to conceal it from the world. If Marian was provoked beyond all patience to find that the dulness had been too much for both of

them, Lestrange shared her feeling to the full, and proved at once Lady Luscombe's best comforter, as he had been Mrs. Vavasour's greatest stay.

Poor Marian's disappointment and excitement—for had she not made this husband's rise the purpose of her life?—made her more womanly, more gentle, more open with her counsellor, than she had ever been; and he, his next move yet unplanned in the collapse of his game, ventured on an openness of sympathy, and an expression of personal regard and admiration, which he had never approached before. For Marian was essentially the great lady; and Lestrange's instincts were wonderfully true, however he perverted them in use. They were to him now as a second nature, born of assiduous cultivation, not of the heart, but of its best social substitute, tact.

In the long, long talk they had together, the new Lady Luscombe fairly opened her heart to her friend, and gave him a full understanding, much as he had already guessed, of that chilled and isolated heart. She had never before been so open with any one; and perhaps for the first time in her life did she allow any one to see her in tears.

It was in the course of that talk that she let him

know the secret so carefully concealed, that her husband's heart was seriously affected. Steady official work, the doctor had said, would be its best palliation, though it could not be a cure. Frets and excitements would be its worst irritants.

Then and there, at once, the Count Lestrange decided on his new game.

From that day he became more and more with Lady Luscombe; more and more to her. "La calumnia è un venticello," and that wicked little wind began to blow about in the new circles which gradually formed round Lady Luscombe. She was born to be a leader in society, and she remained so; but the society gradually changed. Her political influence was gone, and indeed she was too indignant and too mortified to care to keep it. The life she led became of the more strictly fashionable, the more socially exclusive, the more entirely frivolous.

Soon she lived for society alone, in its mere confined sense, and society rejoiced in her leadership. Fashionable beauties and indolent youth formed the crew of the new craft, where a looser tone of manners and of morality prevailed than on board the older vessel.

If Lady Luscombe heard of the rumours which

gathered round her and Lestrange, she paid them no attention, and went on her own way. One thing she did at last; when he was abroad upon some mission or another, she wrote to him, and she wrote more than once. She would have been startled enough if she had seen the expression upon his face when he read the letters.

"You will be the Countess Lestrange now," he said to himself, "I think, my handsome Marian; whether you still call yourself Lady Luscombe or no."

And all this time Lestrange was able in his own way to devote himself to the education of Daisy Brent, who had become the reigning beauty of the Luscombe set. He amused himself, sometimes, by playing her off against the wakeful jealousies of Lady Luscombe, who brooked no rival near the throne. But he was always able to soothe and smooth such jealousies away; and the rumours grew. Lord Luscombe knew nothing about them, and pottered on contentedly enough to his wife's annoyance, devoting himself to county politics and Luscombe Abbey, and becoming great at quarter-sessions, and an authority on scientific farming.

But it happened that about the time when John Brent left England, Lord Luscombe received a letter

when he was alone at the Abbey, which made him start, and mutter, and bite his lips. And the next evening, unexpectedly, he made his appearance at Lusmere House during a great reception which his wife was holding, and showed himself cantankerous, ill-tempered, peculiar. Especially unpleasing and repellent was his manner to Lestrange, who smoked a cigar or two more than usual that evening in his chambers before he went to bed. But the next morning Lord Luscombe was quiet and civil to his wife and to everybody, as he remained. But he took to asking various people questions, and to mysterious colloquies which he kept to himself. With Lestrange he was as confidential as ever, and involved himself again in some City matters, to which he had been paying no attention of late. The Luscombe rent-roll was very large indeed now. He got excited over these and other things, and the doctor was grave with him, very grave; and one day he sent for his lawyer, who was with him for a few minutes only. Lady Luscombe knew that he had been; and Lestrange soon knew it; and a vague uneasiness took possession of both of them. The uneasiness did not continue long, for Lord Luscombe was seized with a bad attack, and after a few days' illness, during which he could not speak, he died. And the

talk and excitement, which the opening of this chapter recorded, followed when it became generally known that the dead peer had a few days before appended to his will, which left everything unentailed to his wife, a codicil which revoked it unconditionally if she should marry again.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE PARTHIAN DART.

It was a matter of some days after the contents of Lord Luscombe's will had become known before Lestrange and the new-made widow could bring themselves to meet. To both it was a crushing blow; for if she did not acknowledge it to herself, Marian had allowed the hope of a genuine love, and of the reality of married happiness at some future day, to spring up in her solitary heart. Without allowing any difference in his manner to be perceptible, after he had learned how frail was Lord Luscombe's tenure of his leasehold, Count Lestrange had none the less allowed that manner to grow very different; and in the four years which had passed between the formation of his grand plan and its sudden and final frustration, he had displayed to Marian Luscombe a constant and watchful tenderness, an un-

failing respect and devotion, which had won her heart and will completely for his own. He at all events set as much store by his conquest of the second, as by gaining the first. He was able to guard himself from any suspicion of ulterior motive by letting her trace his increased interest in her to her burst of confidence in him, not in the especial nature of the confidence. He dwelt upon the manner in which her frank confession of isolation and disappointment had touched him, and found a thousand ways of showing her how deep was his sympathy, and how thoroughly he, at least, understood the misunderstood life of whose pages she had given him a glimpse.

At first, that indomitable pride of hers had taken the alarm when she thought over all she had said to him—she who so prided herself upon her self-sufficing nature. She was sensitively on her guard for any sign of disrespect from Lestrange to her husband, who was still her husband. Why had she allowed herself, even in her first passion of disappointed ambition, to speak of him to any one as she had to Lestrange? For in that interview she had dropped her wearisome mask altogether, and poured out all her difficulties with her husband's dulness and obstinacy, all the efforts she

had made to nurse his position and credit, and her ceaseless trials under his cold and irresponsive nature at home, in language of unconcealed scorn. Lestrange was far too good a judge of character to mistake her; far too keen a player to make any false move in his game. While he threw into his manner to the wife at once that increase of sympathy and watchfulness, to the husband he showed himself, in the same way, more attentive than before. He was more courteous and deferential to him than he had been, not less; and advised him, taking care that the advice and the quarter it came from should at once reach Marian's ears, to withdraw as much as possible from the excitement of London and of City politics, and to devote himself to the quieter pursuits of a county magnate. Very soon had Lestrange assured himself of the gravity of the doctor's verdict, and become convinced that the end was at best a question of a very short time. He would retard it if he could, not accelerate it; and again he could be conscious of a good action. As a matter of fact, it was advisable that he should be thoroughly secure of his reversion before the end came. Marian was touched by the interest he showed, and grateful for this thoughtfulness for her husband, which was so palpably free from

any unworthy or interested motive. More than once, never off his guard, Lestrange allowed her eyes to detect him in the act of watching Lord Luscombe with an expression of anxious sympathy and interest, drawing him away from some conversation in which he seemed likely to show unusual excitement, and with his quiet, restful tones and sleepless tact, soothing the peer into the placid blessedness of his natural self-satisfaction. From the moment when he made up his mind to do it, Lestrange knew well how to win the world-trained and world-worn heart which had never spoken for living man before, and by slow and sure degrees he conquered her for his very bond-slave through her pride.

Infinitely dexterous was the use he made, in the pursuit of his all-absorbing purpose, of his intimacy with Daisy Brent. He played his game with the great advantage, which under such circumstances it is, of perfect coolness on his side. If he had been capable of loving Marian, he would have transgressed etiquette, and would have alarmed her pride. So he was able to observe the advice of the old saw—"Pique her and soothe her turn by turn"—with the experimental curiosity of the practised duellist,

playing with the foil of a raw adversary. He experimented, and amused himself with sundry passes for show and for self-gratification, in his duel to the death in which he meant to win.

While Daisy remained unsuspicious of any ulterior aim, and flirted and danced upon the frivolous way on which she had now resolutely set her foot, to find in the flowers which strewed it, if she could, a Lethe for the wasted intellect and wearied heart, he worked upon Marian Luscombe more and more through her; and more and more Marian Luscombe and he became coupled and united, while Lord Luscombe grew yet more lost to London sight, till the catastrophe recorded at the end of the last chapter came upon the two.

Lestrange's baffled wit and broken scheme betrayed him into a first anger terrible to see, had any one but his valet and factotum, Chaffers, been in his chambers to see it. Even there, his very rage was dangerous in its suppression; in the dead-white face, which every jot of colour had left to the lips, closed tight over the teeth; in the clenched hands and caged walk up and down, and the fierce curses muttered deep under his breath. "Where had he made his mistake?" he thought; "he

who had watched every point in his game like a lynx, and stopped the earth as he went everywhere. But a few weeks before he had been as indispensable to Lord Luscombe as to his wife, and trusted and consulted by him upon every petty point, at every turn. Where had been his mistake, where?"

He sat down and growled; and out of a casket which he unlocked he took out a small bundle of letters and counted them.

"No, they are all there; none of them can by the merest chance have come under Luscombe's eyes."

Then he read the letters over and over again to himself, and laughed bitterly enough.

"Frank and open enough, certainly, and not meant for publication. What a fool Marian was to write them. With such a weapon in my hands, I was armed against any refusal on her part if she had been inclined to make it; not that she would have been. I never saw a woman more in love in my life. And all for nothing —nothing—nothing. Good Heavens! I shouldn't be surprised if she expected me to come forward and marry her for love. When clever women once become fools, they are capable of any folly, and of suspecting men of the same capacity too. I had better burn the

letters. She might get hold of them, and appeal to them as a weapon against me."

He took up the poker in his left hand and held the letters over the fire. Then he reflected, and put the poker down.

"No, I won't," he said; "I never throw away a weapon. I've got to find a new line of battle, and no one knows what may serve. Great Heaven! it is too maddening, just when I thought my life's battle won at last. More than half my life over, and I have to begin again! Am I to go on living on nothing, never secure of the next six months, to the end of my days? Curse that dull-witted old lord—curse him—curse him! To have a career in a million blighted, and by such as he! I'll keep these idiotic letters, if only to spite his widow. Now let me go into the park and think."

He locked the letters carefully away in the casket with the little key which never left his chain, and he went out.

"Shall you dine at home, Count Lestrange?" asked Chaffers submissively as he went.

"I don't know. Don't bother me."

He went out into the wilderness of Hyde Park, where within a few yards of the world's busiest corner

the world leaves a solitude, and he wandered about among the paths and on the grass, switching with his cane at the long grasses and wild-flowers which grew about, smoking a cigar with less deliberation than usual with him, and in spite of himself and all his trained self-mastery, uttering an occasional audible interjection which made a casual actor lift his head from the bench on which he was studying his part, set him down as "one of the profession," and go on again.

Once he turned round in his walk, and found himself face-to-face with a rosy nurse-maid, wheeling about a little Box and Cox in a comfortless perambulator, with their two little heads hanging out over the two sides of the vehicle on the verge of unconscious dislocation. The rosy nurse-maid, whom he had passed the moment before, had opened both her eyes to a wider width, and her mouth to match them, and oblivious of her duties, was staring at Léstrange.

The lesson brought him to his senses at once; he said something good-natured to the girl with an easy laugh, and went away, leaving her to resume her ordinary walk of life, and shake the heads of her two charges violently into their proper angle on their necks again.

He wandered away the afternoon; he hailed a

hansom and drove the round of Regent's Park once or twice; he dined in the quietest corner of the club he had most recently joined, where he was least known; and he went home to his chambers later at night than usual, after more than the usual allowance of cigars, planless still to any special purpose. What in the world was he to do? Well—he must bide his time. Something would happen to give him a new lead. Wait sometimes on events, he thought, and events will wait on you.

Events, however, failed the Count this time, and gave him no special lead which might point to a secure future. If he had been able to see in this crisis of his life one of those calls to better things which come to all of us, his brains and his connection would have found him, soon enough, plenty of solid and worthy work to do. But he had no ears for any such call as that.

When he met Marian Luscombe next, it was a hard trial for both of them; but it became harder still for her, when she read in the face so studiously impassive none of the sympathy the poor lady had been yearning for, but a something new and undefinable, which flashed to her startled nerves the electric message of a formless fear. He looked as hard and as cruel as

death; for as the natural consequence of the feelings in which he had been indulging since the shock of Lord Luscombe's will came upon him, he who had never loved her had passed into a deep phase of hate. If she did not quite know that—out of her woman's nature, hardened as it had been, could not know it—she knew that there was some bitter change. She had nothing to reproach herself with; what was it?

The feeling which had grown up in her heart for Lestrange, unlicensed and half-confessed though it may have been, had in its way softened her, though but for a sad end; and the reflections which that feeling had caused, working in a direction exactly opposite to that in which they had acted on Lestrange, had really brought her to think that out of such apparent evil might come good.

She was free to accept Lestrange's hand after a proper lapse of time; and she said to herself that she was ready to do so, and to give up her fortune for his sake, who had all the brains and means to work for her, if he had the will, as surely he must have. Was he not bound to offer so to do? Would not the world talk cruelly of both of them, and whisper its bitter sarcasms behind their backs about the true meaning of

her husband's will? That was the hardest part of all her trial; as to him, who hated the very thought of ridicule, it was the hardest too. She saw the way to meet and brave it; he did not. So that their first meeting was very terrible to her.

Whatever his first feeling and her suspicion of it, however, he was able after the first to suppress all signs of it, and to speak to her with all due sympathy, while careful to commit himself in no wise. By various questions he tried to arrive at the reasons of Lord Luscombe's conduct, and he saw she knew, though she fenced with the subject naturally enough, and shrank from every allusion.

One day, however, when in his own subtle way, at which she could not take offence, he had pressed her hard, she put without a word a letter in his hands.

"I found this letter among my husband's papers," she said. "It is anonymous; and from the date he has marked upon it,—'Received the — day of ——, 18—,'— he had it on the day when he last came up to town. Nobody has seen it but he and I, to my knowledge. Perhaps you should see it too. Read it, and see if you know the writer."

She gave him the letter, and got up from her seat

and left the room. He took it, and he looked at it, and started as if he had been stung. It was a puling, unmanly, miserable thing, as such things are; much affecting manliness and sincerity, and putting Lord Luscombe on his guard against a danger of which, according to the writer, all the world was talking. Did not Lord Luscombe know why he was persuaded to be always in the country? did not Lord Luscombe know what was going on in town? was it not fitting that the eyes of one of his lofty position and high character should be opened to the reflections that were being cast on both, and on his name, by his wife and a man he knew too well—whose name he would not mention, though from the hints he gave, Lord Luscombe would easily discover it. He, the writer, would not sign his name, for reasons which Lord Luscombe would guess and appreciate; but the facts Lord Luscombe, if he mistrusted him, could easily verify for himself. All he asked in return for the warning,—which, as a warm admirer of Lord Luscombe's career, he could not in his conscience help giving, now that he was on the point of leaving England for several years,—was that Lord Luscombe would never say a word of his letter to any one.

And Lestrange read the poisonous letter through and through, artfully contrived as it was to sting Lord Luscombe in every detail; and through the clumsy disguise which confused the handwriting, he knew in a moment that the writer was John Brent.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DESCENSUS AVERNI.*

JOHN BRENT had taken a characteristic revenge, and a deadly one. Sitting in a chair with the letter before him, the schemer recognized his own impotence to sway events precisely to his liking, with a sense of failure new to him. He had never failed before in anything he meant to do, and now he had broken down over the most important stake for which he had ever played, through the thick-wittedness of one of his puppets and the small spite of another. That this blow should come from such a quarter as Brent especially irritated him. He had held the man in such unutterable scorn, had amused himself so much over his infinite littleness, and had so completely controlled him, that he could not have believed in his venturing to revolt.

* All downhill.

"So clumsily, too!" he thought to himself, as he examined Brent's awkward essays in falsifying his handwriting. "But it is always so. The roughest hands spoil the finest webs. D— the man! what a reptile it is; I wouldn't have given him credit for brains enough even for such a dirty move as this. Just after I had got him that place, too! Ungrateful little brute." The Count Lestrange honestly conceived himself a deeply-injured man; and his reflections took the turn of high moral indignation. King Lear himself could not have resented ingratitude more. But then and there a new purpose came into his mind, which, as he thought matters over, gave his face an expression which would have warned any one who saw it off him like a signal of danger. "You shall repent this to a purpose, Mr. John Brent," he said to himself, when his reflections were at an end. "I give you some six years to mend your fortunes in; and when you come home you shall find a bed of nettles to lie on. The shallow idiot! suppose I robbed him of the place I found for him, by a stroke of the pen? Most men in my case would; but I shan't do that yet, though I may some day. A bad day's work all round, that letter of yours." Count Lestrange merely shrugged his shoulders when he spoke of the letter to Marian,

and told her that he had no idea who the writer could be. He asked to keep it, on the chance of being able to find out; and she left it in his hands.

Four years more went by upon their course, and brought no striking change in the position or the lives of the characters of this our story. But it was a time for three of them, of slow and sure deterioration in different degrees of kind. When it became clear to her that Lestrange had no intention whatever of claiming her hand without its hereditaments, the heart of Marian Luscombe hardened into stone. While her husband lived, she would not own to herself any feeling which could amount to disloyalty to his name, though under the name and guise of friendship, upon which Lestrange had carefully traded and played, she had admitted the Count to such a dangerous place in her familiar thoughts and life. She remembered the letters she had written to him but vaguely, and could not answer to herself how nearly friendship, in the expression of them, might have trodden upon the heels of another partnership. One day—it was many months afterwards—he reminded her of them.

"My letters to you, Count?" she said. "Why, you burned them."

"No, I didn't," he answered.

"Count Lestrange! you said you had."

"Did I? It was a mistake, and I must have been thinking of something else. I seldom burn letters, for one never knows what may happen."

"But—but," cried Lady Luscombe, "you promised me, on your word as a gentleman."

"Surely not," he said. "Do you think a gentleman has no feelings, Marian?" He spoke in a tender and respectful voice, with a mocking devil in the eye.

"Feelings—you—feelings!"

A great sob rose in Lady Luscombe's throat, and she walked away from him to the window. After her husband's death, and after the reading of that cruel will, she had realized what her feeling for this adventurer had become. Till the will robbed her of the future, she never definitely thought of what that future might have become. But then she did—deeply and hopefully, till the first sight of Lestrange dispelled her dream. Then, things went on as before. The man was in her heart, and she could not root him out; could not help hoping that some day, before it was quite too late, he would be touched by the love which he had so sedulously won, and make for himself some position by the right of

which he might claim her. Nor did he relax his hold over her a jot. If he could not have her hand, he had still some use of her fortune, and Luscombe Abbey and Lusmere House were head-quarters not to be abandoned. So still he kept up, with cynical skill, the tradition of tenderness and devotion; still he stayed with her, played with her, consorted with her. And the world, which, as they both feared, had commented with much of sympathetic malice on the nine days' wonder of Lord Luscombe's will, began to shrug its respectable shoulders more and more. Marian had faced the first looks and the first whispers with impassive face and indomitable pride; and Lestrange had let no sign escape him, either of disappointment or form of personal interest in the matter. He openly spoke of the will, when he did speak of it, as a cruel thing to the widow, and as an unpleasing finale to Lord Luscombe's life and character. And as time went on, the world, though it did shrug its shoulders, accepted the alliance between the wealthy Lady Luscombe and the fashionable Count as one of its licensed eccentricities, and dined and danced at her house as of old.

It was after Lady Luscombe had shown some sign, as she sometimes did, of a wish to break with Lestrange

altogether, and to shake off an influence which was too much of a mastery, that the episode of the letters occurred. Lestrange used them as a power, and recurred to them again and again, with every circumstance of art and malice, to strengthen his hold over Marian. He succeeded in misleading her memory and mind altogether as to the terms in which they had been written, which he exaggerated, bit by bit, till he made them an unsleeping cause of fear to her; for he more than hinted that he might one day find means to make them public, if she showed any hesitation about lending herself and her fortune to any of his schemes of self-interest. Fearing him, shrinking from him, angry with herself or his influence, but jealous when he showed signs of devotion to any one else, Marian Luscombe became Lestrange's bond-slave, deaf to other voices when it but pleased him to charm her. His motive in all this seemed insufficient enough, but for the light which in an earlier chapter I attempted to throw on such a character as his. The shock of Lord Luscombe's will, and the discovery of Brent's letter, had aggravated all the evil of the man into a finished fine art, and rooted out every scruple of which yearning and appealing good had left so much as a grain behind. "*Totus, teres,*

atque rotundus," the adventurer came out of that ordeal just as this—

"The most replenished villain in the world."

He hated Marian as he hated Brent, and as before long he hated Daisy.

Daisy Brent went downwards on the Avernian path in her own way, meanwhile. That way had never much harm in it really, I think; for the loyal nature was siege-proof in the citadel, against the whole army of temptation. But some out-works were carried, perhaps. The misery of her life with her husband, with its strain of petty and unremitting mental torture, had gone far to spoil the sweetest woman on the earth.

That she was so, and no other, I, Tom Balbus, do, with my wife's adhesion, loyally maintain. But with the better nature strong in her, and scornful of herself far more than of others, she let the current of her new life bear her on.

She heard nothing of her husband, would not hear; and the thoughts of Guy Faucit, never-ending, never-dying, she crushed like serpents out of her heart, and crushed out half her sweetness with them. She cultivated her beauty; she prided herself in her beauty;

and as she matured and ripened in her womanhood, it put forth new shoots of honour every day. She laughed and she joked; she sang and she acted; she was the pride of the papers and the photographers; she teased good old Lady Pepperharrow, who worshipped the very ground she trod on; and when good placid Sir Hugh, full of his years and his wife's honours, was gathered to his honest fathers, she devoted her time and her energies to the task of unselfish consolation. She had not been so much her old self since she left her husband's house with that mark under her dress. She reigned supreme in the court of folly and frivolity which buzzed and trifled round her; she flirted with reckless impartiality with every courtier there, and let no one of them flatter himself that he had gained a foothold in her heart. Woe to him who passed the boundary; for he never came near to it again.

Now it fell out that, one day, the Count Lestrange transgressed. I am not careful to record the why or the how, or to tell how gradually, while keeping Lady Luscombe in his power, he allowed his admiration for Daisy to draw him on. It was in an outburst of jealousy of her that Marian brought upon herself the first scene about the letters. Careful and watchful always, bent

upon his revenge on John Brent, and confident as ever in his own magnetic power, the Count Lestrange fancied at last that he had won Daisy's heart, and one day he let her know it.

The adventurer had blundered again, and shrank into himself under her flash of indignant honour. For she stood at her full height; she spoke of Lady Luscombe with personal regard; her bright colour and her angry eyes framed and lit up a lofty picture of unmeasured scorn; and he met his match, did the Count Lestrange. But he knew the falseness of his move in a moment, and he repaired it as far as it could be repaired before more harm was done. He persuaded Daisy that he had been led away; he did all in his power to soothe and to disarm her, and finally persuaded her to say no word of what had passed. After all, alas! these things were too much the way of the half-conscienced world in which they lived. She had encouraged him, perhaps, as with an air of honourable and repentant mortification he intimated that she had. So she spared him and held her tongue, and let things be as they were again, as far as she could, though studiously on her guard from that moment with Count Lestrange. As for him, he was more upon his guard

than she; and, accepting the position he had made for himself, never again let look or word escape him which could suggest offence.

And so, gradually, the influence of the man's mind and will re-established its old sway over Daisy's intellect. But a new purpose began to shape itself in his active brain.

"Wrong again, was I?" he thought to himself at home. "That is a very inaccessible character. 'Tu me lo pagherai,' John Brent, though, for all that. I wonder what on earth has become of the man called Faucit?"

The man called Faucit travelled all those years away, bearing the mark upon his heart invisible and uneffaced, like the preacher's counterpart of Hester Prynne's scarlet letter. His love for Daisy had gathered round all the roots of his life, and no new growth was possible for them, till the tree should decay and die for lack of sap. He lived the wildest of wanderer's lives: in the bush and in the desert, on sea or on prairie, anywhere but in towns. Most of all he loved the strange haunts and strange ways of the men of the sierras, whom Bret Harte has sung. He had enough to live on, with his simple healthy ways of life; and he

made himself something of a name too, though he carefully concealed his personal identity, by some stirring sketches of that stirring life, in prose and verse, which he published in America. Some echoes of them came to England, and Daisy Brent, casting her eyes over a set of magazine-verses one day, started and dreamed. So ran the lines—

IN TWO WORLDS.

UNDER the forest, of its snows unladen,
  And kissing back the nervous kiss of spring,
I sit and dream of courtly knight and maiden,
  And old-world pomp encompassing a king.

Out of her wintry sleep the earth is waking,
  And birds and flowers carol her *réveillé ;*
O'er West and East the common promise breaking,
  Breathes the first whisper of their holiday.

Without, the mighty forms of things primeval
  Stand all untenanted of Custom's robes ;
Within, my mind shapes pictures mediæval
  With pencil fashioned forth in other globes.

The rugged miners share my board and pillow,
  And by the camp-fire sing their lawless song ;
But at a bound my thought o'errides the billow,
  And breaks the strong surf by a flight as strong.

What do I here, among the waving grasses,
  Which never learned to trim their graces wild ?
While by my side Nature's rude army passes,
  Another world still claims me for her child.

In vain I ply the axe in pass or clearing;
In vain I fill me with the unfettered air:
Still to my eyes are other scenes appearing,
Still my heart hearkens the low voice of care.

Among our ranks no woman comes to harm us,
And sow us discord for our hands to reap;
No wiles and jars allure us or alarm us,
Or wanton with the mighty arm of sleep.

Yet here, for me, though heart and will are master,
As strong as iron and as calm as death,
The will will waver and the heart beat faster,
Touched by the memory of a woman's breath.

Why are ye here, rude fellows of my labour,
Thus outlawed from the bounds of woman's reign?
Read I, beneath the swart hues of my neighbour,
Another story of another pain?

She said she loved me—and one day she left me
Without a warning and without a word;
Of past and future at a blow bereft me,
The cause unspoken, and the plea unheard.

Behind me honour, and high hopes before me,
A life of earnest and a name of worth:
Her glamour shed the bright delusion o'er me,
Her presence kept the promise of my birth.

Then fell the blow, and past and future shivered
Just at a fairy finger's heartless touch;
And from the bondage of a lie delivered,
I laughed that I had trusted overmuch.

Laughed! and the echo of that hollow laughter
Rings in my heart with one eternal knell;
And the slow years which rolled their burden after,
With all the burden cannot crush the spell.

Pines of the Sierras, spread your mantles round me,
  And hide me from the past, untrodden West!
Oh that the free lands and free souls that bound me,
  Could break the fetters of my prisoned breast!

In vain, in vain! not the dividing ocean,
  With all its storms, one memory can drown;
While the vexed phantom of a lost devotion
  Still in the tortured bosom dies not down.

Up and to work! the western spring invites me,
  And Freedom calls me forth among the free;
But no—nor work nor freedom here delights me;
  The eastern bondage falls again on me.

Eight years after the day when first he met Daisy, the wearied spirit brought Guy Faucit home to England again.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE COUNT LESTRANGE'S WAGER.

It was the fag-end of the London season, when the world is melting away to its pleasures and its holidays abroad and at home, when the active rush to mountain-climbing or to moor-drawing, and the indolent or over-eaten go off to German spas, and swell the coffers of Dr. Kurgemess, who is saved the trouble of prescribing anything for anybody except water, and would justly be suspected if he did. Others who are less troubled about their digestion, or less able to pander to it, follow the call of Custom, and desert their homes and their comforts for the unequalled wretchedness of sea-side lodgings, happily to the unfeigned delight of the infantry, who are made the excuse for the proceeding in most cases. Much as the Londoner vaunts his London, he spends most of his time there in considering where he

is "going to" next; while the country-cousin, whose tastes or profession let him keep out of the maelstrom, may sit under the shadow of his vines in peace, and wander afield only when the fancy prompts him.

> "O fortunati nimium, sua si bona nôrint,
> Agricolæ."

In nine cases out of ten, the agricole sees it not, and thinks that he is wasting his days and bushelling his light out of London.

The fag-end of the season always found the Count Lestrange in town, unless he happened to be absent on one of his mysterious errands of private diplomacy abroad. For the fag-end of the season meant that he was more in request with the fag-enders than any man, with his exhaustless store of information and anecdote, and his pleasant capacity of being all things to all men.

It was only when the last roses of summer had ceased to bloom on the London dinner-tables, that Lestrange was off to carry on the social war in a round of country-houses, beginning with a campaign of deer-stalking or grouse-shooting in the North, and subsiding into the milder excitements of partridges and pheasants in due course of calendar.

Very soon in his English life had Lestrange realized

that for an outsider who wants to become a social power, the royal road to the heart of the male British Philistine lies through the gun-barrel. So, being one of those happily constituted persons who do everything well to which either taste or circumstance leads them to turn their hands, he made himself a crack shot, without caring for sport the least in the world. Indeed, his utter absence of all excitement in the matter was probably one of his chief secrets of success.

I am myself a man of peace, who only carried a gun four times, and grew rather "mixed" over it. The first time, I discharged it at an untimely landrail when it was exactly a yard from my feet, and blew the creature into so many pieces that nothing but an odd feather or two was ever found. The second, I fired at my first and only snipe, a parlous bird to hit at the best of times, and nigh out of gun-shot; and with an inward wonder carefully concealed, I found that I had slain him. The third, now confident of my powers, I took long and deliberate aim at a sitting rabbit within easy distance, who did not seem to mind me the least; and was perfectly justified, for I missed him. The fourth, made to carry a friend's gun under protest over a field or two (there are friends who will do it still), I became

lost in my own literary meditations, and forgot entirely where I was till an indignant keeper told me that I had just neglected a whole covey of partridges which had offered me a choice of shot, and were disappearing. I blankly gazed at their retreating forms; and, ungratefully, but with entire unconsciousness of a guilty motive, discharged my friend's gun straight at him. I missed him, too; but he made such a Vokes-like bound into the air, that for the moment I thought I hadn't. He never asked me to carry his gun again. And I think that he must have whispered the tale abroad; for nobody else has, either. Whereof I rejoice.

No such sins as these had Lestrange to atone for; and many a hardened cover-haunter was jealous of the cool prowess of his steady gun. In the evenings, his talk and his song were as welcome to the women as his sportsmanship had been to the men; and he brought with him to the table of Crabtree Hall all the latest intelligence gathered in the rooms of Lady Backbite, where he had been staying last.

The Count Lestrange could live at free quarters pretty well all the year, if it pleased him. And for a substantial part of the year it did. But his chief resource was, and remained, Luscombe Abbey.

It was on a July afternoon, then, as the last London month was drawing to a damp close,—the Derby had been run that year in a snow-storm, and some casual thunderstorms were all the heat that had vouchsafed itself,—that a bright fire was burning in Lestrange's chambers, somewhere off Piccadilly, among the curious little impasses of the Mayfair maze.

They were good and comfortable rooms, oddly furnished out of all parts and corners of the world, till they might have passed for a museum in little. Strange skins of strange beasts; gaunt curiosities of China or Japan; stuffed birds of tropical parti-colour; assegais and cross-bows, and muskets of antique formation; rare gems of painting and of bric-à-brac; carved chairs and couches of rich mellow wood; fantastic curtains artistically looped and draped; these things, and things like them, made up the Count Lestrange's interior. And he had so planned and so arranged its general tone and background, with a view to harmony of colour, that the whole effect was as of "a study in reds and blacks."

"A hot fire for July, even a cold one," thought the man Chaffers to himself, as he occupied himself in the arrangement of the rooms where he was the ministering

acolyte. "But the Count likes it. He's an odd man, my master."

The stealthy man who acted as the Count's servant was gliding about the sitting-room of Lestrange's suite, which contented itself with being a suite of two, after the fashion of the older lodging-houses. His bedroom and dressing-room combined was separated from the other by the central folding-doors which make the despair of English dramatists, accustomed to the side-doors of their French brethren, and finding them not—when they want to hide Lady Barbara, or to withdraw the lover unobserved by a private way, with the assistance of the chambermaid on the left, just as the indignant parent enters by the right, and discovers the ingenuous daughter seated at her work, centre. What is the wretched playwright to do with a sitting-room opening blank into another, with no relief but another door opening out just at the side of it, upon the same staircase? Doors at back in flat are as part of his stock in trade, and the British architect rarely provides them.

Was it in deference to some dramatic instinct that Lestrange's two rooms did possess a sort of appendix, in the shape of a narrow strip of a chamber opening into

the drawing-room only, and like it facing the street through a slip-window?

People were facetious about that little room, and called it the Blue Beard chamber, the laboratory, the confessional, any name which occurred to them. By rights it should have been devoted to the uses of Chaffers, who was indeed allowed to make a sitting-room of it at times. But his master did not love too much proximity, even in his useful case, and relegated him to a bedroom in the upper regions.

The ear of Chaffers caught a sound at the door, and the parlour-maid of the establishment came in. He had heard a ring at the door-bell first, and had looked out and smiled.

"Is the Count at home, Mr. Chaffers?" said the girl, a spruce and trim handmaiden, with no suspicion of the "slavey." The Count's landlady understood his ways too well for that; and her reverence for her lodger was the first article of her social faith.

"Yes, Miss Hannah."

Hannah's pretty cap withdrew itself, and silks and satins rustled in its place. The lady who wore them threw up her veil from her face, and she looked quickly and impatiently round the room.

"Where is the Count, Chaffers?" she asked, with the way of one familiar with the rooms. "I want to see him at once."

"Yes, my lady," answered the man, as with a scarcely perceptible knock at the folding-doors he disappeared into the bedroom.

Lady Luscombe, for it was she who was the visitor, looked round and round with a strained and eager look, and threw herself into an oaken arm-chair, which stood like a senator's seat of office by the round table in the middle of the room. Impatiently she tapped her foot, and impatiently she moved her head, as with her hands she pushed back from her face the bands of the whitened hair.

"I must make one more effort before I leave town, hopeless as it seems," she thought; and again the Asmodeus of romance caught the unspoken soliloquy. "My letters! If he would give me back my letters! Fool that I was, to be so led on. But that man would lead on anybody to do what he wishes, with his strange eyes, his strange talk, his fatal fascination. With any one else I shouldn't feel afraid, I think, for what could he do? What would he have the heart to do, if he could? Heart!" and a sad and bitter smile

crossed her face. "He has none—none. He has never forgiven me my husband's cruel will, and the terrible clause which went so deeply home. I am afraid of him! afraid! afraid! and I don't know even now whether I love him or hate him. Sometimes it is one, I think, sometimes the other. But I am always afraid of him. What were those letters? what did they say?" the next thought said, and Lady Luscombe was on her feet again looking about the room. "I never can remember how far I trusted him. My conscience longs to feel clear; but I am always trying to recall the words I wrote to him, and I can't. Would they spell ruin, as he says? And why should I care for ruin or for anything else, in the blank life which mine has turned to? But I do care, and the thought of those letters keep me in a fever. Where does he keep them —where?" And she began angrily to turn over the cards and letters which lay on the table in a queer old plate of Dresden red, after the impetuous fashion of the young wife in the 'Pattes de Mouche.' "And why does he keep me waiting?" she muttered at last "If he doesn't come soon, Daisy will be here to fetch me."

She began her idle search again, even throwing

open some drawer in the writing-table between the windows, and thrusting her hand among the scattered papers. At her back the folding-door was quietly opened, and the Count Lestrange was in the doorway, watching her with an amused smile. He wore the short velvet coat which was his home alternative to the frock-coat and swallow-tail of decorum, and there was no trace of white in his hair, and no perceptible change in the lines of his face, to match the ravages of Time upon her. If he had emotions, the Count Lestrange kept them in order.

"Can I help you?" at last he asked, placidly.

Lady Luscombe started and turned round; and, resting her hand upon the papers in the drawer, looked straight at Lestrange.

"You can, indeed," she said; and her eyes were full of a steady and reproachful appeal. "Oh, Count! Count! give me back those letters."

Lestrange's eyes wandered, as they so generally did, and met hers no more fairly than his answer met her invocation. His smile imperceptibly deepened a shade, and his eyes seemed looking after his smile. Like the Quaker of tradition, he only answered by a question.

"Why did you write them, if you want them again?" he asked. "The property in a letter, you know, belongs to the receiver."

"Not if he has promised to destroy them."

"You misunderstood me," he said, "as I have told you before. And I say again, if you want them back, why did you write them?"

The speaker had moved to the well-lined bookcase which filled the wall between the room and the slip-room, except the space where the door was. It was a curious bookcase, decorated with gilt sphinx's heads between the upper shelves, with corresponding feet which peeped out of the partitions of black wood at the lower ones, and rested on the black marble slab which covered cupboards below. He was leaning an elbow upon the slab, and examining his books, a favourite process with him. Lady Luscombe looked at him, went up to the table, and spoke shortly and hardly.

"Because I cared for you, and you know I did."

"And I keep them," he said,—as quietly as ever, but with that mocking devil lurking in the tone, which she never seemed to miss now, whenever, since her husband's will was read, he spoke to her of things

like these,—"I keep them because I care for you, and you know I do."

"It is not true!" she said, passionately, though very low. "You must have forgotten, I think," she added bitterly, and with all her pride under arms, "that, under my own eyes, you ventured to make love to Daisy Brent."

"Did she ever tell you so?"

"No. But I know it. You could not blind me if you tried."

"Why should I try then, if it is of no use?" he answered. "But if I did do so, depend upon it, I have not forgotten; I never forget."

"She was wiser than I," Lady Luscombe said, "for she saw through you."

"Not entirely. I don't think it's easy. But she judges me more fairly than you do."

"How?"

"She knows," said Lestrange, in his gentlest voice, into which he suddenly threw a tone of pleading, "that my passing attentions to her were the result of a little pardonable jealousy—of some one else."

"Jealousy!" exclaimed the other, "and why? Daisy Brent was fortunate," she added, with an infinite

sadness, and again sitting in the oak-chair by the table, "to escape those 'passing attentions' better than I did."

"Perhaps," he said, taking his seat opposite to Lady Luscombe.

Neither moved till the brief talk was done, which was to prove pregnant with result for this story.

"But such women live on passing attentions," he went on, with a contemptuous expression of slight regard for the object, which had a wound in it; "though they like them better when they don't pass."

Lady Luscombe knew these aphorisms of his, and shrank from them.

"Daisy Brent is a good woman," she said abruptly.

"I don't think so."

"Do you think any woman good?"

"Not many. But surely *you* should forgive me," he said, with the sudden pleading again in his voice from which this time he had banished the tone of mockery, "if I am not easy to please."

The change of tone went home; and Lady Luscombe answered it as pleadingly.

"Lestrange! give me back my letters!"

"Marian! let me keep them!"

"What for? why?" she asked.

"For sentiment, which rules me," he answered. The mockery came back; and a half-repressed exclamation of disappointment, weariness, anger, pain, came from Lady Luscombe. "It is all I have left," Lestrange went on, "now that I may not marry you."

"Now that you may not marry my fortune, you mean," she said bitterly, throwing all disguise aside. "You could have had me had you wished."

"Without money on either side?" said he. "We are not young or selfish, like Mrs. Brent."

"How you hate her!" was Lady Luscombe's answer after a brief pause, in which she looked at him strangely. "You say these things so often. Oh, don't deny it! I believe you want revenge upon her."

"If I do, I shall soon have it."

"How?"

"She will throw over her husband."

Lady Luscombe started, as he spoke with that deliberate slowness which he sometimes adopted. Then she laughed and shook her head.

"It would serve Mr. Brent right, bad man that he is!" she said. "But she won't, however long he stays in India. She is a good woman."

"You doubt it," Lestrange said, pointedly. "You say these things so often." Then his manner grew careless and off-hand. "Excuse me if I write a note for a moment, an answer which I forgot to send," he said.

Lady Luscombe excused him with a sign, and he took up pen and paper. Then as he was writing he laughed, as if some humorous notion had crossed his mind.

"What will you bet me," he said, "by way of a joke, of course," and he held his pen between his fingers with a smile, while looking at his note before him,—"you have grown fond of betting, you know,—that Daisy Brent doesn't run away before the end of the year?"

Lady Luscombe laughed shortly. "With you?" she said.

"Oh dear, no," and he laughed a good deal while he went on with his note. "I wouldn't have her."

"With whom, then?" Lady Luscombe rather scornfully asked.

"What does that matter? You see you daren't back your opinion."

Lady Luscombe looked at him sadly enough, and

answered with another scorn in her voice, which had a ring of regret in it.

"What have you to bet, Count Lestrange?"

"Your letters," he said very coolly, still writing.

"Ah!" She started as if at a blow.

"What price do you put on them?"

She hesitated for a few seconds.

"Any price," she said.

"It's a mere fancy wager," said Lestrange, and taking up his note to read over to himself. "Shall we say—ten thousand pounds?"

"Nonsense," she answered. "That *is* a fancy wager."

"Like Shylock's, isn't it?" laughed Lestrange. "And as much in earnest, Mrs. Brent," was the aside which his thought supplied.

"Shall we book it?" he added, folding up his note.

"Seriously?" asked Lady Luscombe, puzzled thoroughly, and not understanding the drift of the scene, or seeing that it had any.

"What a question!" answered the other.

"You are a strange man," she said suddenly. "What are you?"

"I don't know. I never did. Shall we book it?"

"Ten—thousand—pounds," emphasized she.

"Nothing to you," said he. "Your letters are everything, in the view which you persist in taking of them and me."

"The view you made me take, you mean."

"Well, if you prefer it. Never mind the view; it is the value which matters."

"Is it your way of giving them to me?" she asked, very seriously. "It looks like it, you know."

"Doesn't it?" was the careless answer, which she might read as she pleased. "Why not? Shall we book it?"

"Shall I?" she said.

"I have a few trifling conditions to make," proceeded the Count. "You are just leaving London. You must collect a party at Luscombe Abbey at once, of the people whom I shall choose—all in your own set, don't be afraid. And you must give Daisy Brent no warning."

He spoke with all the careless indifference of Shylock of his single bond and merry sport; but it came over Lady Luscombe with a sense of fear.

"But this is wickedness," she said.

"Oh, no," he laughed, "amusement;" and his

manner was more off-hand than ever. "And if I should require it, you must even help me a little. Bah! the joke won't go too far."

"It *is* like Shylock," she said, with the hesitation of Bassanio. "No; I don't think I'll do it."

"Think of your letters," he went on, not looking at her, "and of the use I *might* make of them."

"You would never——" she began.

"I don't know. It's such an odd world."

"I *cannot* understand you," said Lady Luscombe, completely baffled by his changes of manner, and more than ever doubtful whether this strange scene were jest or earnest, or a mixture of the two.

"Nobody ever could. Come, think how great the odds are in your favour. As you say, it's making you a present; and without letting you feel the obligation too much."

There was another pause, and Lady Luscombe was ill at ease.

"Is this—bad joke—the only way?" then she asked.

Lady Luscombe looked at Lestrange again, and thought that she could read in his face, which she had tried to read so often, that he really meant to make

her a present of her letters, after putting her to some test by this impossible wager. So thoroughly had he worked upon her fears about those letters, so vaguely but deeply alarmed her with allusions, insinuations, and covert threats about them, that they had at last assumed diseased proportions in her eyes, and wore the shape of a perpetual fear. She felt that "the only way" was final, and she persuaded herself that the wager was a jest; and then and last, the thought of Daisy Brent's singular character, firm as a rock under all her frivolity, which Lady Luscombe's womanly perception had keenly read, came across her like a charm.

"I know Daisy Brent," she said suddenly, lifting her head with a kind of defiance in it. "And I agree."

"Done," said Lestrange, no muscle moving. He took a small note-book from his pocket, and formally he noted the strange wager down.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE SPIDER'S WEB.

"You really have the letters?" said Lady Luscombe suspiciously, after another pause, as her hand fell upon a pile of papers.

"Yes. You needn't look for them; they are in that casket there." He pointed to a coffer of mediæval bronze, which stood by itself upon a small table in a recess, carved and wrought in the rich German designs of the time. "A most curious collection of manuscripts and letters that box contains," he said. "It will be quite a legacy to the memoir-hunters some day. Nobody ever has the key but myself, not even Chaffers."

He touched a small key which was attached to his watch-chain, whose pattern matched the casket. Then he began to sketch his scheme for the party to meet at Luscombe Abbey, and talked the names over with the Abbey's mistress.

"You will have Daisy's brother of the party, you know," she said.

"The soldier? No, I shan't."

"Do you mean you won't let me ask him?"

"You may ask him. He won't come."

"Why?"

"Ask him, and see. There are ways of doing these things."

He rose from the table and went to the window.

"There is the very man," he said, "calling with his sister; I wonder what brings them."

"Ah!" answered Lady Luscombe. "They are come to fetch me."

"In the nick of time," said the other. "This is the first visit Mrs. Brent has done my rooms the honour of paying them, though she has often talked of coming. Come into my sanctuary for a moment; I have something that I wish to show you."

"You don't want me to meet them. Why?"

"I want to arrange matters with you first, that's all. I shan't keep you five minutes, and Mrs. Brent can make acquaintance with my room before I do the honours. They are coming up-stairs. Come."

He spoke with a quiet tone of command to which Lady Luscombe seemed accustomed, and with him she withdrew into the inner room, as Daisy Brent and her brother entered by the other door.

Dick Fairfield was a well-looking soldier of a traditional type, with nothing much to distinguish him from other soldiers of his kind. They have the comfortable conviction fostered in their minds by admiring maidens, and still more by each other, that they are the salt of the earth; and one grain of salt is not called upon to be more unlike another than is the case with the proverbial two peas. Civilians, I think, cherish a certain resentment against the class, for which its textual flabbiness gives them much excuse. If no companion is pleasanter than a well-graced and active-minded soldier, the members of the thousand-and-first haw-haws are on the other side of the scale. It is so impossible to know what to talk to them about. Dick Fairfield always bored me to extinction more than any man I knew, and I could only tolerate him for his sister's sake.

We met often during those eight years, Daisy Brent and I; for Lady Pepperharrow patronized and made much of me, and I was much with Daisy Brent

at her ladyship's country-house meetings. For her I never bated one jot of my regard; and I read the truth behind the frivolous externals of her life with much sad thought of my own. During all that time, we never spoke of Guy Faucit but once; but there was a difference in her manner to me from that which she wore to all the world beside, which I could never fail to remark and to honour. It was for Guy's sake, I knew; and I loved her for it. The exception to her rule of silence was when—once and at once—she cleared herself in my eyes (though, faith, I had never really been able to doubt her) by telling me the whole truth about her luckless marriage.

"I wanted you to know it, Mr. Balbus," she said, "because I want you to tell it one day to *him*. Further than that it need never go. Now let us never talk about it again."

He would have learned it soon enough, I think, if it had depended upon me. But blows like that which struck Guy Faucit tell differently upon different men; and during the whole of his long and solitary exile he gave his friends no sign, and no one but his lawyer (under the seal of absolute confidence) ever knew where to write to him. When he came back to England and

settled as he did in Yorkshire, none of his friends learned it. Only one man did; and he was not a friend.

I saw little enough of the brother, and wished that little less. His remarks, when he thought it was time to make one, always managed to be particularly irritating, though without the smallest intention on his part. Some men are wonderful in that way.

Once at dinner, for instance, just after I had brought out a new drama of an ambitious kind with some success, he was sitting opposite me, and it dawned upon him, during a lull in the conversation round us, that he had bestowed none of his upon me. He did not wish to be neglectful, so suddenly addressed me with the deep deliberation which marked his manner whenever he did speak, causing the co-birds of his feather to say that "there must be a good deal in that fellow Dick Fairfield, you know, if you could only get at it."

If it was in him, however, there it stopped. It was thus he addressed me—

"I say, Balbus. Isn't it about time for you to give us another fa-arce?"

I could have hit him. Even as he bored me of old, he bores me now, and it bores me to describe him; and I shall let his talk with his sister, when they came into

Lestrange's rooms, tell itself. He really liked his sister, and was at his best with her. Poor girl, I have no need to describe her, for I must have done so but too much for the patience of my readers already. If they do not know by this time what my heroine looked like, they never will; and I must have made a mess of it. I am sorry, for the women's sake, that I can find no technical description of the entrancing brown dress she wore, with the sideways sweep of gilt buttons, medal-wise, the size of a shilling for the body, and a florin for the skirt, which gave her the sort of Diana look which sate upon her best of all, though she was all the goddesses and all the graces in turn. She had that reckless —and alas! that it must be said—fast manner which had grown upon her of late, though in her, somehow, it never repelled. It never seemed real, I think, to anybody, and the fastest of her companions liked Queen Daisy best without it.

DAISY (*taking the room in a moment, with approval*). So the mysterious Count really lives somewhere, after all! This is the Castle of Udolfo. Do you smell any sulphur about, Dick?

DICK (*taking in nothing at all*). No; but it's deuced hot.

DAISY (*looking at everything*). A blazing fire in July! And what an uncanny taste in colours. The place looks comfortable, though.

DICK (*looking at nothing*). Don't provoke that man, Daisy. He's dangerous.

DAISY. Why? What harm can he do me? and why should he want to do me any? We are the best of friends. He fell in love with me, you know, like all the rest, and I snubbed him for it.

DICK. Did he though? Damn his impudence.

DAISY. Don't swear. I oughtn't to have told you, for I said I wouldn't tell anybody. But a brother's nobody, and it didn't matter. It did the Count good to be snubbed.

DICK. He isn't likely to forgive it. You talk lightly enough.

DAISY (*with sudden seriousness*). Perhaps I don't feel so lightly, though. (*Changing again.*) It's a way the men have, which means nothing. And the wicked Count took his whipping very well.

DICK. I wish you'd drop him. No good ever came to anybody from being a friend of Satan Lestrange.

DAISY. That's a very shocking name, Dick. He's creepy, but he's very amusing.

DICK (*surlily*). I don't see it.

DAISY. Sense of humour deficient, dear. Everybody thinks him so.

DICK. Who's everybody?

DAISY. Why, everybody. Everybody who's anybody, you know; all the right sort.

DICK. Slang again!

DAISY. Dick among the prophets! You stupid old soldier, when did you first take to preaching? (*with a dash of affection*).

DICK (*with the same, uncomfortably*). I don't like leaving you to-morrow and joining my regiment. Your head's in the wrong place, altogether.

DAISY (*ecstatically*). But the heart, my Richard! the heart is in the right! Its every pulse beats fondly for an absent lord, who is wringing from the Indian native the uttermost rupee, to lay it at the feet of his pining wife, in a lump! Brute! I hope he'll never come back again.

DICK. John Brent is not a good lot, no doubt——

DAISY. Not strictly speaking. But that's not my fault, is it?

DICK. Still, you are his wife, and you ought to be more careful.

DAISY. What of?

DICK. The family name.

DAISY (*drawing herself up*). Dick!

DICK. Oh, I mean it, you know. I know that you've had hard lines in life, and I like you to enjoy yourself. But you may go too far.

DAISY. Take care, or *you* may. Who ruled those hard lines for me?—and Heaven only knows how hard they are!

DICK (*growing uncomfortable*). Heaven, I suppose.

DAISY. Not a bit of it; it was man's work all over. I should have served Heaven better in spite of all of you, and steadily refused that man.

DICK (*sulkily*). For that penniless lover of yours, Guy Faucit!

DAISY (*firing up in a moment*). Don't mention his name! I won't have it! I'll cherish one good memory through this unworthy life of mine, to keep my head straight. It will do it better than you can!

DICK. I shouldn't like you to meet him again.

DAISY (*full of scorn*). Don't be afraid. He wouldn't speak to me if I did; and quite right too.

(*Breaking into a wail.*) Oh, why—why—why did you all marry me to John Brent?

DICK. Our people were on the brink of ruin, you know. It was to save the family credit.

DAISY. A bad way. Good never came of such money as Mr. Brent's.

DICK (*with just disgust*). No. He lost it all soon enough.

DAISY. Thank Heaven! or he wouldn't have gone back to India. I am free from everything but his name.

DICK (*sententious again*). You are much *too* free, Daisy.

DAISY (*in arms again*). I will not have you say that again. I was persuaded to marry money, and to play my heart false, for my father's sake. But some men, Dick, would have found some better way of saving the family credit than by selling a sister's life and happiness. When you join your regiment, brother mine, take care of the family name. It's safe enough with me.

"I hope so," muttered to himself, at the end of this dialogue, a listener at the door. Then turning to Lady Luscombe, he added, unheard through their

conversation by the others, "You are quite right; I am making you a present."

"Join his regiment, did she say?" thought Lady Luscombe, who with Lestrange had heard the last sentence from the open door of the inner room. Lestrange, it may be, who had cultivated a very keen sense of hearing, and could listen and talk at the same time, might have heard more. Daisy and the Captain did not see them till Lestrange stepped forward.

"Mrs. Brent!" he said. "You have found me out at last. I am delighted to receive you."

"Ah, good morning!" she answered, carelessly giving him her hand. "The reception is a warm one," she added, with a laughing look at the fire, "Count Mephistopheles!"

"Madame Marguerite!" he said in a low voice, and with an inclination of the head. And he smiled to himself as he said so.

"Is that a sneer?" asked Daisy.

"Oh, no; a compliment. How sweet she is," he thought as he looked at her; "it is almost a pity— You are a dangerously pretty woman," he said to her in a low voice, turning over some books on the table, while the other two were talking together.

"Still?" she said, with low and firm emphasis.

"Still, if you would only let me say so."

"I shan't, you know. Count Lestrange, remember and take care!"

"We should make such allies, Daisy."

"Sir!"

"I beg your pardon," said the Count Lestrange.

"Only my friends call me by my Christian name."

"You are lucky," he quietly and pointedly answered, "to have so many friends. She will have war, then?" he thought. "Very well."

Lady Luscombe looked at them uneasily as they talked together in a voice she could not catch.

"Nonsense!" she thought to herself, "the girl's as good as gold." But she was uneasy and conscience-smitten, and wished the wager undone.

"Captain Fairfield," she said, rousing herself, "the charm of London being over for the year, you will bring Daisy down to the Abbey at the end of the week? We shall be a pleasant party."

"Very sorry, Lady Luscombe," answered the soldier with a genuine regret, for he thought the Abbey much pleasanter work than his duties; "but I must leave her

in your friendly care. I join my regiment at Gibraltar to-morrow."

Lady Luscombe gave a slight exclamation.

"I told you so," whispered Lestrange.

"Couldn't you put it off for a month?" she asked.

"Uneasy already!" whispered the Count again.

"*I* would put it off, willingly," said Fairfield; "but my Colonel won't. I've overstayed time already, and he is peremptory."

"The regiment, dear Lady Luscombe," laughed Daisy, "is lost without Dick. The men are reported on the verge of mutiny."

"Always chaffing," muttered her brother, with his normal sulkiness.

"Chaff is the salt of life. Isn't it, Count?" she appealed.

"You sprinkle it very freely at times," he said.

"All's fair in war!" she answered, laughing again; "and—shall we say in 'love,' Count?"

He bit his lip a little. "Do you know the meaning of that word?"

"Perhaps," she said; and there was no laughter in the voice then.

The Count watched her under his eyebrows, and he

said to himself, "I think you do, Madame. We shall soon see."

"What will Lady Pepperharrow do without you, Captain Fairfield?" said Lady Luscombe, finding her invitation in vain. "She says you are the best secretary and collector in the world. What is to become of her great subscription for the conversion of the Jews?"

"Oh bother!" interjected Daisy, irreverently. "When she asked me to subscribe I said I couldn't afford it but if she liked to send me a Jew, the dear old lady, I would do my best to convert him for her."

"And surely," added Lestrange, "the Jews are rich enough to pay for their own conversion."

Their laugh over Lady Pepperharrow's proselytizing schemes put the party in good humour with each other; and Lady Luscombe announced that it was time for her to carry Daisy off for the end of the last flower-show of the season at the Horticultural, where some friends were waiting for them.

"The last roses of summer!" said Daisy.

"Which wouldn't bloom without you," was Lestrange's comment.

"Pretty," was what she said; and what she thought while she said it was, "He makes me creep all over."

"Then you will not give me those letters back, as you ought?" pleaded Lady Luscombe once more in a low voice with Lestrange.

The Count smiled the plea aside, and made some laughing comment on the wager which was so soon to put them in her hands again.

So she sighed and accepted her fate, and offered him a seat in the carriage, if he was minded to come.

"Thank you, no," he said. "I shan't help the roses, and I have a good deal to do. We shall meet to-night at Glycerine House. *Au revoir!*"

He saw his visitors to the door with his accustomed courtesy, and went thoughtfully back to his rooms. He sate down in his chair, wheeled it before the fire, and lit up the eternal accompaniment to thought which so many as well as he have found to be its best sedative and stimulant in one. He took out the little book in which he had entered his strange wager, and he referred to other of its pages. Then he referred with care to a book of accounts, carefully kept; and his face grew rather dark as he went into it.

"Only just in time," he muttered to himself; "I'm glad I kept those letters. Yes, I have a good deal to

do," ran his musings before the fire, when he had put up the books again. "I must put money in my purse, as counsels honest Iago. What says my friend? 'Pleasure and action make the hours seem short!' A fine fellow Iago, and so little understood. I must write a treatise to whitewash him some day, after the fashion of modern history, and leave that thick-headed Moor blacker than he was first painted. Ten thousand pounds to be won before the year's end; and only just in time, for I'm in unpleasantly low water; and this is the chance which, as Iago says, makes me or foredoes me quite. How much did mine Ancient die worth, now? He must have been a warm man at times, and without a dollar to curse himself with at others. It's a grand thing to live by one's wits, given the wits to do it. Now then—to work out my plot. *Dramatis Personæ:*—Heroine, Daisy Brent: safe from love, she thinks. Why? Because she is one of the few who can love, and can remember. I wouldn't have risked my wager upon any chance but one. Hero, Guy Faucit: old lover, recluse and misanthrope, living near Luscombe Abbey in retreat, without an idea how near the moth has crept to the flame. And the flame knows it as little. Burn up till you blaze, my child. Ha, ha!

of all the coincidences in the world, if there were such things, the oddest would be my meeting the man Faucit coming out of his lawyer's room, just when I had managed to learn of his return to England. I knew him at once, though he didn't look at me. I never forget a face. And the lawyer, with no idea that he was breaking confidence, talked to me about the strange client who wanted to find a desert for himself to live in. And I was able to suggest the very place, close to the scene of operations. Could Iago have done better, now? The worst of it is that Faucit has no money, and all women like diamonds. Now if only his old hunks and miser of an uncle, my good friend Foster (promoted to the place for the purpose), would die in time, and not leave his money away from him, it would help me wonderfully, though I might do without it. Foster was breaking up, by my last intelligence; but he's Scotch, and very tough. He has not made a will yet, I know. How shall I introduce myself to this Faucit? I want a good effect to begin with. The man's a student and poet, and dabbles in German metaphysics. Why not play upon that string? Mephistopheles they call me, confound them. I am not one of them, though I live with and by them; and they know it, and so do I, and

I hate them for it, brainless puppets that they all are! And that unlucky widow and her money and estates were in my hands, but for that unprincipled will. The selfishness of these aristocrats, even in dying, is perfectly shocking. As for you, Mr. John Brent, and you, Mistress Daisy— How strange that so many motives should all work together. Ten thousand pounds! A great comfort, a small annuity. What a fool that woman is about those letters! What on earth does she suppose I could really do with them? Still, with a little skilful manipulation— Mephistopheles, eh! It would be a striking introduction."

He was smiling over his thoughts to himself, as Chaffers came into the room after his furtive knock.

"A telegram, Count Lestrange," he said.

"Ah! from Scotland!" said Lestrange to himself as he took the paper. "From my trusty agent, Foster's lawyer." And he read the telegram. "F. is worse—has had a stroke—can only live a week or two. No will . . ." "Good Heavens! how timely!" he thought. "'Pleasure and action make the hours seem short.' Can I afford to wait for a week or two, on the chance of bringing to Faucit, by way of credentials, the first news

of his heirship? At all events, I will risk it for a while. Yes; I can afford it. Chaffers—"

"Yes, Count Lestrange."

"We go to Luscombe Abbey at the end of the week."

"Yes, Count Lestrange."

END OF PART I.

PART II.

The Drama.

"Mephistopheles thrown upon real life, and obliged to manage his own plots, would inevitably make blunders."—*George Eliot.*

CHAPTER I.

THE HERMIT OF THE OWL'S NEST.

SOMEWHERE in the great smoke districts of Yorkshire, and near to one of its main capitals of industry, there is a strange old ruin on the moorland slope. It is a wonder how it got there; for smoke and soot have laid the strong hand of annexation on the whole country-side, and antiquity seems like an obstructive to be effaced. It dies hard, however, the storied past; for men built hard and strong when they built slow and true, and by the side of the old abbeys which have crumbled down to us, the modern factory or railway-shrine has an odd appearance of insecurity as well as tawdriness.

I am not prepared to give the exact birth and parentage of the old Yorkshire castle where my story now reopens, which had lost both use and name in the

lapse of years, and is known in the neighbourhood only as the Owl's Nest. Though scarcely six miles distant from the big trade-city, the hum of whose wheels seem almost to reach the ear, as at times the wind brings palpable news of it in a thick pall of fog fighting to be free, it might be in the heart of a desert but for such evidence as that. Green slopes spread upwards to the hilltop behind; and the wild moor heatherland faces it in front from the other side of a sudden valley, with a stream running townwards at the bottom, clear and sparkling, and innocent of the pollution waiting for it so little further down.

The ruin itself forms a complete though broken quadrangle, uneven and overgrown. A big old tower occupies the north-east angle, and another the south-west, while a straggling parapet unites the two in either direction. In the north-west corner stands the antiquarian gem of the whole—an archway nearly perfect in preservation, as it is quite perfect in form, a pure specimen of the lancet arch which will not, somehow, be imitated with any exactness by anything we moderns can contrive. Those secrets are as lost, seemingly, as the lost books of Livy, and must be as much the despair of architects as the galop in

"Gustave" of dance-composers, or as that "*vilaine bête vivante,*" the stone-horse which Romans know, was to the French professor of drawing, who exposed the sins of its anatomy by example. "*Pourtant, messieurs, la mienne est morte,*" he said. It was through this archway that the quadrangle might be entered, when I was there. Perhaps it is gone now, though I am writing but of a very few years ago. Mine is a story of our own time; but it is a time which goes fast upon its way, though weighted perhaps now and again, in spite of trains and telegraphs, with the drag called Boredom. There was the arch, however, and there was the old tower opposite to it, which also gave access to the enclosure through a passage choked, till you knew where to find it, by a thick growth of laurels. The walls of the old tower, of which two sides were standing, formed the angle then, and stood boldly out as a shelter against sun or wind for any one who cared so to use them. Stray picnic-parties from the city came there now and then, bringing their sheaves with them; for there was no inn near to help them to their picnic-needs. There was no house at all but one small cottage, just on the other side of the road, which ran under the northern parapet from tower to arch. Beyond the road

the ground rose boldly and suddenly into the picturesque slope leading up to the top of the hill, turfed and green, and good riding-ground for some miles.

In the cottage, when this part of my story opens, was living a solitary man. The few waifs and strays who belonged to the neighbourhood were of the kind who have no visible habitation or known means of subsistence, but are as offences in the eyes of the Law, which expects everybody to be moderately well-off. They seem to have lairs in the grasses, like the warriors of Roderick Dhu. These few, however, had a kindness for Mr. Fraser, the stranger who had suddenly taken up his quarters among them a few months before, and had an eccentric way of his own of doing them good. He talked very little, and smoked very much; did unobtrusive kindnesses, and hated to be thanked. Nobody knew anything about him, or cared to ask. He had not written a letter, nor had he had any, since he came. He was a man who seemed well on in middle age; dressed very roughly, but always like a gentleman; big and muscular, with a growing suspicion of portliness. The face was fair and clear, with the pink English complexion which turns so soon to bronze, and the eyes of the true Saxon blue, too prominent, but good. The

features were strong rather than handsome; the forehead, both broad and high, giving its chief character to the face. The mouth did not present itself for criticism, having retired into the recesses of a thick beard and moustache, which curled all round and over it, and were so grey as to give the man an appearance of age which the features, closely looked at, and the hair many shades browner, were inclined to contradict. The brown was of a silky softness, and irrepressible in its tendency to curl, which it owed partly, perhaps, to the owner's disbelief in oil-colours for the head, and faith in cold water. The nose was like most noses without form and void, but did the face no harm as it attracted no attention, and did not invite it, being in fact, as the same owner said of it, "good enough to blow." Six good feet of height, and a stonage coming nearer to fourteen than to thirteen on the average, served to carry this very healthy specimen of English humanity, and formed a whole curiously at odds with the utter solitude of his life. There was nothing about him of the broken man, but everything of the elastic one, shown in everything he did—in the firm step breasting the heather, in the steady hand throwing the line, and the keen eye to back it; or in the strong forehead

which bent over his beloved books, and seemed to shut out without an effort every thought and every image disconnected from the page before him. He looked the man of action, every stout inch of him, and not the dreamer. But it was the dreamer's life, apparently, that he had elected to live. And the face bore one clear and lasting mark—the mark of a great sorrow.

He fished the trout-streams, and he shot the moors, and he shot and fished well. At other times he left both rod and gun at home, and shouldered a thick stick for company and not support, and strode for miles and miles in the bright northern air, he, and the stick, and the dog Frisco. Frisco was a noble brute of mastiff breed, who had come from the golden gates with his master, six thousand miles away. The mutual affection of the two was a pleasant thing to see, as they strolled, or sate, or talked together, as men and dogs do talk sometimes, when they understand each other thoroughly. Frisco slept at the foot of his master's bed, and took especial interest in watching the morning tub which braced the giant for the day; and he seemed to know, before the master knew it himself, what was to be the occupation of the morning. The large, true, intelligent

eyes, with a strange and surely a beautiful world of love and thought behind them—shall we penetrate the secrets of that world, perhaps, some day?—seemed to be always on the alert to discover his friend's plans and wishes.

One curious habit of Mr. Fraser's there was, worth recording. He was fond on Sundays of walking to a little barn-like church some miles away upon the hills, which gathered under its wing the few and far-between worshippers to be found thereabouts, and watching them go in, and listening to the cracked old bell. The people of the village of Mould-on-the-Moss, for so was the little hamlet called which owned this parish church, watched him with much curiosity. For he did not go in himself. He looked, and smoked, and thought, and went away. Once or twice, upon week-days, he found his way to the village and asked the sexton for the key. A character, in those parts, was Delves the sexton. Then he stayed alone in the church for five minutes, and came out more grave than ever, after a spell of what he called thought, which was really prayer. The man was no unbeliever, but was one perplexed, as yet, by the eternal—no, not eternal—problems of suffering and wrong. The buzzings of the Agnostics had

something puddled his clear spirit, and the smoke of the pit troubled him.

A large portion of his time, rain or fine, the stranger passed in the old Owl's Nest. He had chosen for himself the corner I have spoken of, where the two walls made an angle. Here he had rigged up a water-proof tent where he could smoke and read in all weathers. Here he was smoking and reading on the day when my story re-opens, without the tent this time, for it was a glorious September afternoon. It had been a long wet summer, and had given up, as early as May, all idea of being anything else. So September came with one of those Indian bursts with which it often does come after seasons of that kind, to apologize for shortcomings in the handsomest manner. And the man called Fraser sate with a rich meerschaum between his lips, with a colour on it like the top of the clouted cream, fresh made in its own country, cloud-compelling, and deep in his book. He was sitting in a rough wooden arm-chair, and had as rough a table before him, with a brandy-and-soda on it in a long glass, from which he sipped occasionally and with no especial zest, being one on whose face temperance and self-control were written in every line. The book he was

reading was German, and it was the second part of "Faust."

"Not a bad translation, I think," he thought, taking up a note-book in which he had a habit of scribbling odd scraps of verse or casual quotations in pencil. "Listen, Frisco, old boy, and give me your ideas."

Frisco lifted his head, and wagged his tail once, as one who was all attention, while his master read.

."What do you think of it?"

Frisco wagged his tail twice, with approval, and lay down again.

"What is the use of it all?" muttered his master to himself, impatiently. "Why, in the name of common-sense, do I live this useless life, as if I were a debtor hiding from his creditors, or a man who had done something to be ashamed of. We have nothing to be ashamed of, Frisco, you and I, and we don't look it. Your tail is as the tail of an honest dog, and you would have nothing to say to me if I wasn't worthy of you and it. But I can't help it. I—I— Oh my darling, my darling, with your voice as sweet as Heaven, and your face as true as Truth, is it possible that you could have told that long lie to me? Yes, you did. Well, be it so."

He took up the book, and the strong will mastered the wandering fancy at once. The masterful look came full upon the brow and face. Frisco, who had been watching the sudden outburst with infinite solicitude, looked satisfied and shut his eyes. And neither man nor dog, absorbed in their own reflections, noticed the entrance of another figure on the scene.

CHAPTER II.

BEAUTY GOSLING.

It was a very pleasant figure in its way—that of a fresh and pink-faced youngster of the class who look eighteen all their lives, till the balls, and the clubs, and the late hours, and all the dissipations, take a sudden revenge and age them all in a moment.

The Honourable James Gosling had as little beard as Orlando, but cherished the soft down upon his delicate upper-lip with infinite solicitude. His face was singularly handsome, and recalled the pictures of Byron; but the eyes wore a perpetual look of innocence and surprise, being withal very round and very open, which marred the resemblance. Like the ambered fly, he seemed incessantly wondering why he was anywhere, and why on earth he should be expected to do anything. Nobody, perhaps in consequence of this, expected him

to do much; but the clinging affectionate nature made him welcome everywhere; and he was allowed to purr away for hours in the snuggeries of fine ladies, hard to be found at home by more pretentious visitors; just as at every gathering of men, in all lines of life, he was sure of a welcome. Painters and actors loved him well; and he believed himself closely connected, in some important way, with artistic life. The bright summer-picnics on the river, organized by some pretty actress whose head wore the manager's crown without seeming to lie uneasy for it, were never complete without the butterfly patronage of Beauty Gosling. He entered the quadrangle quietly through the lancet-arch, and it became evident at once that Frisco would permit the intrusion. For the dog was the first to look curiously up; and he made no remark at all beyond a wag of recognition. Gosling nodded to the dog familiarly, and drew nearer to the man he had come to see, whose thoughts and faculties were pathfinding in the poet's land.

"There he is," muttered the visitor to himself, "at it as usual. Pipes and Poetry! Why a fellow who is such good company for any fellow should keep out of every fellow's way, I can't make out."

Then he came forward.

"Faucit!"

The strange solitary started, and came back to earth slowly and half-composedly, as a man wakes from sleep to his troubles or to his happiness. He looked his visitor a little in the face before he answered him, not without something of the friendly smile on his, which this youth of the ruddy countenance was well accustomed to see.

"Fraser, young 'un," he then said, quietly. "I've often told you to forget the other name, as I have. How are you?"

"Thanks—I'm fit. Old Luscombe was a judge of champagne, and his worthy widow don't spare it. Consequently, with the morning's dawn, I'm fit."

"That's very satisfactory," said the other, paternally.

"Doosid. I can't say as much for you, though. You look awfully bad about the eyes, old man. Damme, a fellow might take you for a hundred."

The man called Fraser, no other than our old friend Guy Faucit, winced a little. But he only answered, slowly, and with something like a sigh—

"The fellow wouldn't be far out."

"Humbug!" was the cheery comment. "Got any

B. and S. handy? Thanks!" as the other pointed to the rough table; "that's lucky. I tooled the little mare over from Luscombe Abbey—the six miles in the half-hour, and I'm doosid dry."

"Help yourself," said the other, nodding, and passing a corkscrew.

Then the eyes began perceptibly to travel dream-wards again, and he took up the book he had laid down.

"What's up with him?" thought Gosling; and met the situation by patting Frisco's handsome head, and bestowing on him a few well-appreciated words of caress. "What are you reading?" then he said, abruptly.

"The second part of 'Faust.' Do you know it?"

"No. I didn't know there was a second part. I know the first,—Gounod's, you know,—but I never read that. Let's have a look."

He leant his arm familiarly on the older man's shoulder, and looked over it.

"All right," said Faucit. "I'll begin your poetical education, Jemmy. Read this."

He pointed to the book with a smile.

"Ah! German; I know that from the printing. Haven't got any English about you, have you? I'm

better at that, though not too good. My godfathers and godmothers in my baptism neglected my languages dreadfully."

"There's some English for you, then."

"Whose is it? the German fellow's?"

"His German, and my English. I've just been making the translation."

"The doose you have. At the old game still. I should have thought you'd dried up down here. Tell it us?"

The other recited his lines slowly, as he had recited them to the dog, as if to test them again to his own ear. Again he began to seem unconscious of company, and to be passing into a world of his own.

The solution of the question, "What are your thoughts like?" would have interested any observer who watched the strong set face.

Gosling was not much of an observer, perhaps. He listened to the lines with eye growing rounder and rounder, like a pool into which a stone is sinking; and the pathetic, half-animal expression, of dumb speculation as to what he was meant for, came into his graceful face.

"Ah!" he said, as if deliberating more than was

usual with him; "doosid fine that. I don't know what the blazes it's about, but it's doosid fine. I'm stoopid about poetry, except burlesques. The little Whyte Chappel puts me through them sometimes. Old man, you're dreaming," he suddenly added, with a genuine ring almost of yearning in his tone. "Wake up!"

The quick ear of the other caught the intonation, just as his sensitive nerve felt on his shoulder the shy, sympathetic touch of the boy's hand. (Gosling was not a boy; but he was always called so.)

"You're right, Jem, I was dreaming." He shut up the book, turned round with his chair towards Gosling, and looked at him with a real and evident interest. The other had a pull at his brandy-and-soda, with as evident relief.

"Tell us about yourself, come," said Guy. "I'm fond of your cherub face, my boy; it does me good. And you're a good fellow to leave your fun and your smart friends as constantly as you do, and come over for a chat with the hermit, as they call me. It must bore you tremendously."

"Bore me? humbug! Do you think I'm likely to be bored by my old coach, who was so awfully kind to me up at Oxford?"

"I didn't do much for you."

"You pulled me through my divinity, which I swear no one else could, and looked after me like a trump. And that was eight years ago: and then you bolted from Oxford, and shied up your fellowship, and the fellows said you went abroad, though nobody knew why or where; and everybody forgot you, and I never heard of you again till I spotted you down here the other day, beard and all, calling yourself Fraser, and cutting everybody. Then—didn't you keep my brother Gander square with the dons all through? Dear old Gander! he's gone no end of a howler on the turf since; but he never forgets you—nor do I, nor the governor, nor any of us. Damme! there!"

The speaker delivered himself of his tirade without reflection of any kind, walking up and down, to Frisco's obvious astonishment, finishing the brandy-and-soda in distracted gulps, and filling up the glass now and again with an absolute unconsciousness as to which of the two liquids he was pouring out.

"Drop that, my child," was the quiet answer.

"Hanged if I do! What man of my time at Oxford would forget Clipper Faucit? Look here—you've no call to run to seed in this way. It's not

right. Brains are rare; and you mustn't do what you like when you've got 'em. I wish I'd got 'em; for I'd try. I've kept my word since I spotted you here, by accident, though I don't know that I ought, and said nothing about you; but now they're all coming here to spot you, and I've come to let you know. Don't bolt."

The other had jumped to his feet, followed by Frisco's eyes.

"How do you mean, coming here?"

"I mean what I say, though I know that ain't worth much. I tooled over this morning because I promised to keep dark about you, and Lady Luscombe's lot mean to picnic here to-day, and I thought I ought to let you know, though I've said nothing. I say I wish you'd join us. Beastly things, picnics, but awfully nice people. Do come."

"Thanks for the warning," answered the other quietly. "I'll keep out of the way. Don't talk nonsense."

Gosling's face fell visibly, but he incontinently proceeded to talk again; while the recluse subsided into his chair, and gradually, into absence of mind.

"Like the rest of the fellows. Whatever I say is always nonsense. They call it 'bosh,' but it's the same

idea. Hang it, I say, do come! The Luscombe isn't a bad lot, though she gives herself airs and all that; and her niece Carrie Beaufort is awfully jolly—spoons me rather, but her aunt don't see that. The aunt wanted Gander; but *he* didn't see that. Then there's Lady Pepperharrow—wonderful old woman—always wanting to convert everybody—though nobody knows what to. Everybody laughs at Lady Pepperharrow, but everybody likes her. Then there are some good men. There's Lord Pentonville, otherwise old Pen., otherwise 'Hard Labour'—supposed to have turned nine hundred—rum 'un he is, but a doosid good fellow! Then there's Norbiton and Surbiton, you know—one's a Dook, and the other's a Marquis. Always together, and no good without one another, like the men in Leech who took two to show the pattern. And Count Lestrange—Gad, you must know *him!* Talk about rum uns! Comes from Greece, or Poland, or Japan, or somewhere that way, with a sort of title which he picked up somehow. Queer beggar; been everywhere, and knows everything; belongs nowhere, and lives on nothing. Licks us all round at shooting, billiards, and the lot. Sings like a bird, and spoons like a turtle. Nobody likes him, and everybody asks him; everybody's afraid

of him too, except the Brent, who's afraid of nobody. She's at the Abbey too, under the capacious wing of the Pepperharrow. By Jove! the Brent!—there's form!—the best out; and all the men mad about her. Don't she carry on a few? Got a husband out in India; liver, and all that. I should stop there if I was him. She's splendid—Daisy Brent."

The Christian name struck suddenly on his friend's ear, though it was some time before it seemed to reach his sense. During Gosling's chatter he had rambled far away; and it wanted time for him to catch the threads again.

"Who's that?" he said. "What were you talking about?"

"Why, the people at the Abbey."

"Oh, I beg your pardon. I was dreaming again, and I didn't quite hear."

"Oh, damme!" said Gosling, pathetically. "Doosid hard lines, that I can never get the fellows to listen to anything I say; and I talk a lot, too."

"You do, Jemmy," the other answered, with reflective gravity.

"Don't chaff. If you don't listen, of course you won't come."

"Come to what? oh, the picnic. No, not to-day."

"No, nor to-morrow, nor any other time. I must go and look after the picnic lot, I suppose. You must own that it was very good of me to let you know about them, when I might have let you in in spite of yourself. Bother the picnic. I'd rather be out in the turnip-fields, bar the Brent."

"I wonder, Jemmy, if you will ever grow any older, and take to talking English?"

"Why, what do I talk now?"

"Goodness knows! a tongue without a name. Your Greek was bad at college; but your present style is incredible. How soon will your friends be here?"

"Precious soon now. Very soon I mean; and I must be off. But I shall come again, mind. I'll never let you off till I unearth you for the public benefit."

"Don't take the trouble. I'm past praying for."

"Ah, I shouldn't be much good to you in that line. Well, it's a sell; but by-bye."

He clapped his friend on the shoulder, patted Frisco on the head, and was off through the arch. The dog's eyes followed him with what might have been an expression of disappointment at his master's obstinacy.

The master's eyes were on the book again, before his visitor was gone.

"If you'd have a turn at prose," said Gosling, for a last word, shrugging his shoulders, "it would do you a lot of good. Adoo!"

"How that boy used to make me laugh at Oxford," thought Guy Faucit, letting his book fall upon his knee. "And he's not a bit changed. Why can't I laugh now?" ran the thoughts translated into words. "Eight years ago was it? Yes, just eight. Eight years ago I was still in the old rooms at Balliol, coaching, with my old friends about me, and my dear dead mother to spend vacation with. An authority in the schools and on the river; popular, happy, very happy; with a past I could be proud of, a present I could enjoy, a future I could trust in. I was twenty-eight, and felt eighteen. Now I'm thirty-six, and feel—what was it he said? A hundred? Yes, about that. I wish I felt it in body, but I don't."

He rose from his seat and stretched his arms, instinctively feeling with his left the muscle of the right. "I believe I could pull the dark blue through yet, between Putney and Mortlake. How long must I go on living" (and restlessness and impatience began to

take possession of his manner), "at a moderate calculation? But this isn't living. Mind, heart, and will—that's life; and they died eight years ago. She did it well, that girl. What's become of her? What's the name of the man she married? I don't even know."

He bit his lip and bent his forehead, and threw himself into the chair again. Once more he took up the book, but this time the will played him false, and he could attend no more.

"I wasn't born vindictive, I think," he said to himself aloud; "but sometimes I feel that if I were to meet the woman who changed me like this, it might be bad for her."

The laurels in the angle behind him, which have been before described, were gently parted as he began to speak, and a man's pale face looked through. It was a very pale and sinister, but attractive face, and full of breeding. He heard the words, and smiled, and stepped forward quietly behind the speaker's chair. Frisco saw him, and growled low but angrily. But the new-comer took no notice of him, and for the moment the dog did no more.

"I shall go mad with these fancies!" cried Faucit, who did not hear the growl, his head resting on his arm

on the table before him. "Faust, eh?" he said, with a bitter laugh. "Faust, who conjured up the devil! I should think so. Who wouldn't conjure him up, if he came with the old gifts in his hand? Faust got his money's worth, anyhow, and was a cur to turn round on his best friend. Come to me, devil, come to me, and take me at your own price, if you will give me back one hour of the old spring: the youth to begin the world, the money to command it, the friends to make it easy, and the love—to make it real! Yes, and more than that—the revenge that makes it even! Money—youth—friends—love—revenge!"

The strange soliloquy ended, and was suddenly answered as thoughts sometimes are, though scarcely perhaps as these were. The man who had entered through the laurels came forward, and touched Faucit on the shoulder. He was in a riding-dress, booted and spurred, and leant familiarly over him.

"Excellent things, all of them," said the intruder. "What are you reading?"

CHAPTER III.

A STRANGE VISITOR.

"THE devil!" cried Faucit, jumping to his feet at the sudden address.

"Are you?" was the dry answer. "Not an easy subject to read."

The student looked at his new visitor with an almost startled curiosity. He was a singular contrast to the one who had just left him. The pale face was oval in shape, and the well-set head was covered with jet-black hair, parted in the middle, and lying close to it, without curl or wave. The nose was straight and cleanly cut, as all the features were, with a constant expression playing about the nostril. The thin, rather colourless lips were shaded by a narrow black moustache; and a short pointed beard met the mouth below. The eyes were small, black too, and very piercing, with a

habit, however, of looking away from the person spoken to, if he on his side was given to looking others straight in the face. The forehead was low, but had a character of its own; and the whole face, which had in it a kind of strange magnetism, impressed men at once with a subtle sense of intellect and influence. In age the man might be about forty-five or fifty. He was of about the middle height, as the average of height goes in men of his class, and singularly thin of build and constitution—a characteristic made the more marked by the black dress he wore, high black hat, frock-coat closely buttoned, black trowsers strapped over his well-shaped riding-boots, and broad black necktie tied in a loose bow under his turn-down collar. In the centre of the white shirt was one small stud of bright diamond; and on the fourth finger of the right hand he wore one ring—a curious production, apparently, of German or Italian mediævalism. It was a hoop, of three rows of gems, the centre being made of a dozen small pearls, while the two outer bore nine stones in the same order—an amethyst, sapphire, aquamarine, ruby, opal, emerald, aquamarine, sapphire, amethyst. He was fond of showing this ring in the different lights that fell upon it, and of looking into it himself, and into the spare

and small, but strong expressive hand which carried it, whose two forefingers, laid together, started and curved apart from each other at the middle joint—an odd sign, some say, of a power of impressing the individuality upon others. The feet were small and shapely enough for a pretty woman to be proud of; and even in his riding-boots he was shod coquettishly. Gloves he did not wear, being too fond of his ring. The whole man, with the strange surroundings of the scene and the wild thoughts that were tossing in Faucit's mind, created on the latter an immediate and very powerful effect.

> Seemed as from some enchanter's cave,
> Or some deep vault beneath the wave,
> To an unholy prayer,
> Some spirit not of middle earth,
> Yet human-seeming, form and birth,
> In mocking tone of covert mirth,
> Made answer then and there.*

Most effective of all was the voice in which the stranger spoke — a voice curiously soft, sweet, and deliberate. He spoke very low, yet with such quiet distinct emphasis that no word was ever lost to the listener's ear.

* "Old Play."

"Who are you?" asked Faucit, abruptly, after a brief pause.

"Never mind who I am. You are Guy Faucit." The speaker was not looking at the other for the moment, but turning over the leaves of the book which had been dropped on the table, behind which he stood, tapping his boot carelessly with his riding-whip.

"My name is Fraser," said the other roughly.

"I think not." And the visitor laid the book down, and seated himself easily in the chair just vacated, with no appearance of familiarity, but as little of diffidence. The face of the man with the two names grew rather dark and angry, and Frisco, who had been *couchant regardant,* contributed another low growl to the dialogue. "Good dog," said the stranger, in an offhand way.

"What brings you here, whoever you are?" asked Faucit, who had taken his place towards the centre of the old quadrangle, and with his two hands in his pockets was taking the measure of the intruder, with an expression both of mistrust and uneasiness.

"You do," answered the other carelessly, and with perfect good-humour. "You called me, didn't you?"

"Called you?" said the student, puzzled.

"Am I different to what you expected? I was

always a gentleman, you know; and can only dress as one."

"Oh, I'm in no humour for mummery, sir," the other answered, shrugging his shoulders impatiently, and turning away. "This old place is as open, of course, to you as to me; but as far as I am concerned, you are not privileged."

"Pardon me; I'm a privileged person. And we are wasting time, which is precious to me, though perhaps not to you. What price do you offer," and the speaker rested his right arm upon the rough table, leaned forward with a new seriousness in his tone, and looked at the younger man, "for the commodities you were asking for?"

"What commodities?"

"Money and youth, friends and love, and—revenge."

"Did you hear my thoughts?"

"Well, I ought to apologize; but you think so very loud. A pretty place this, but in baddish repair, and draughty in the winter, I should think. But to return: what price do you offer for those four things?"

"To you?"

"To me."

Guy Faucit burst into a laugh, which moved the other in no wise from his seriousness.

"Ha, ha! this becomes amusing. Like my prototype in the book there, to any one who will give them to me, my soul, if you like it!" Recklessly and bitterly enough were the words said.

"What? in the nineteenth century? You don't keep pace with modern thought, I see."

"Ah, you don't believe in a soul?"

"If *I* didn't, my occupation would be gone. I'll be liberal, and on the chance that, in spite of modern theories, you have a soul, I'll take it."

"Done!" said the other, laughing more naturally and with more good temper, as if he were grasping the humour of the notion. "But you must tell me your name, you know."

"How material you are. I have had so many. But, in the present century, I am called the Count Lestrange."

"Well," said Faucit; "and you live——?"

"Don't ask too much," answered he, with a rippling kind of laugh, which was a kind of smile in sound, placidly expelling and savouring the while a cloudlet of well-graced tobacco-smoke from a scented cigar.

"Don't ask too much. I am staying, not living, at the Abbey near here, Lady Luscombe's place, on business. Her party are excellent people, from my point of view."

He sent a puff of smoke through his nostrils, blew an upward breath after it, and trimmed his nails reflectively with a small ivory pocket-knife. By this time he had seated himself, with his legs comfortably crossed, on the small chair which faced the other's from the side of the table where the laurels were. Faucit was not sitting, but standing, and watched him restlessly.

"Ah!" he said, "at Luscombe Abbey. You know Jem Gosling then?" he added after a pause.

"Your pupil?" answered the man who called himself Lestrange. "Yes. I expect to be very intimate with him some day. He is a finished specimen of that fashionable remove of the new school, whose language is slang, whose topics scandal, whose diet brandy-and-soda. You indulge, I see?" he said carelessly, looking at the remains of Gosling's visit.

"Very seldom," said Faucit.

"I'm sorry for that. It's such a useful agent of mine, and so active now-a-days. This age will be

known in future history as the brandy-and-sodaic period, or as the age of B. and S. — brandy and slang."

Faucit laughed shortly, and it was a cheery laugh to hear, with the ring of a very sound pair of lungs in it.

"You're a strange fellow," he said, already under the influence of the indefinable charm of this new acquaintance.

He took the chair opposite the Count's, and produced a short meerschaum which had safely passed all the dangers of colouring. He looked at it with fondness as he took it from its case, knocked out a small remnant of ashes, tested the passage with a preliminary draught or two, then filled it from a battered old pouch with mechanical precision, and was proceeding to light up when the other interrupted him.

"You smoke too, I see," he said familiarly, but without any suggestion of impertinence, "a short pipe, and Cavendish tobacco. Quite right. Another of my agents. Let me offer you a mild cigar, against my own interests," he added, bringing out on his side a dainty cigar-case mounted with a cipher, and stocked with cigars on one side and cigarettes on the other.

"I always lay in a stock when I call in at the Havannah."

"Thanks," answered Faucit, declining the offered case. "I prefer a pipe. It's such a companion," he said, with half a sigh.

The Count Lestrange looked at him as he lighted up, and did the same himself for a fresh cigar.

"Like a wife," he said, abruptly. "Have you got one?"

"A wife! No. Why do you ask?"

"Because I prefer cigars," answered the Count, carelessly.

"I don't follow you," said the other.

"Don't you? A pipe is the type of a wife. Let me look at yours. Yes," he went on, taking the pipe which Faucit handed him with evident curiosity, and interest in his strange visitor. "Yes, very nice for those that like it; sweet, well-coloured, and ripe. But how much time and pains did it cost you to bring it to that perfection? How much watching, coaxing, humouring, and occasional nausea? Neglect it for a while, and the colour will die out. The game may be worth the candle, perhaps, when you have succeeded in producing a pipe like this. But how many pipes are there that

won't colour, and will burn? That's why a man so often marries a widow, a worldly-wise woman, or a practised flirt. He buys his pipe ready coloured, forgetting, poor devil, that it was coloured to suit other tastes."

There was a slight smile at one corner of the mouth and an indefinable something in the voice as he said the last words, which could not be seized, but left an uneasy impression on the ear.

"What a singular parallel," said Faucit, uneasily, the pipe suspended in his hand, his legs crossed, and watching.

Frisco growled.

"Shall I carry it further?" asked Lestrange. "I prefer cigars. Look!" and he let a thin stream of smoke curl round his moustache. "You can buy them coarse and cheap, if you please. At the worst, you can throw them away half-smoked, and for a minute they leave a rank taste behind them. But choose them well, as I do. Savour the first whiff, the sweetest of all! let it burn slowly, evenly, tenderly; you know at the beginning that it can't outlast an hour. It turns to ashes as you smoke it—yes. Black if it's a bad one, and gone in a moment. But see how my ash clings still,

white, firm, and round, till the last taste is gone and the last kiss savoured, and then melts at a breath as this will, to the four winds of memory!" And he flipped the white ash away.

"Go on," said Faucit; "I like it."

"It would carry me too far. I find a doubtful specimen even among my best sometimes, which comes to a knot in the middle, and goes out. I can knock off the ash and relight it, if I will; but it will never smoke the same again, and I prefer to throw it away. There are plenty more where it came from." And the soft voice took the same tone again.

"True enough," observed Faucit, half-attracted and half-repelled. "But I smoke a pipe because it's cheaper," he said with a laugh.

"Ah! and a wife is not. All parallels break down somewhere," said the Count, laughing too, pleasantly, at himself, "and that's where mine does. But why consult economy?" he went on. "You're rich enough to please yourself."

"Rich! I!" answered the recluse. "After all, you don't know much about me."

He spoke rather abruptly now.

"Don't I?" said the other, careless of the change

of tone, and speaking even more quietly than before, and with deliberate emphasis. "After your mother's death, when you had left Oxford, for reasons of your own you took another name, and travelled abroad for some years; then you settled here a few months ago, buying the little cottage close by, and spending your time here. It's an odd idea," he added, looking round the time-worn old place; "but I never quarrel with anybody's taste in the matter of residence. Mine has been thought peculiar, you know," said the Count, with an odd smile, and half-shutting his eyes, which were on Faucit's face.

The hermit was growing visibly restive under this curious visitation, and his annoyance showed itself in his voice and manner, as he got up from his seat, shut his pipe up in its case with a snap, plunged his two hands again, British fashion, into his trousers pockets, and began to walk restlessly about the enclosure, Frisco prowling after him protectively. The Count watched them, but didn't move.

"There are many ways," said Faucit impatiently, "in which you might get as much information as this, sir, if you care to take the trouble to pry into other men's affairs. As you know so much, you may be aware exactly what my fortune is."

"I am."

"You are welcome to the knowledge," said the other with a short and irritated laugh, "and to the fortune, if you like. Of all miseries, a competence is the worst."

"Avoid vulgar errors," said Lestrange, shaking his head with an air of admonition. "It's an excellent thing, only men don't use it properly. Yours is not a bad competence, though."

"Splendid. A few hundreds a year."

"Forty thousand," was the cool reply.

"What?" The sharp question rang through the ruins, as the man turned full round on his visitor.

"That was about the figure of your Uncle Foster's fortune, I think?" said the Count, with a new but undemonstrative seriousness in his tone, while those magnetic eyes of his shifted a little, now that the other was looking straight at him.

"My Uncle Foster! Where did you learn so much about us? He behaved infamously to my mother, and we have never met for years. His fortune is no concern of mine, for he will never leave me a penny of it."

"I know that." And Lestrange made a study of his ring. "But, like men of his character, who dislike

leaving pennies, he wouldn't leave it to anybody else either. He died in a fit of apoplexy, without a will. You are his heir."

The quiet phrases, dropped softly and impressively one after the other, fell upon Faucit's ear without reaching his sense, and he felt like a man talking in a dream.

"Died!" he said, putting his left hand to his forehead, and trying to think. "Where and when?"

"In Scotland—last night. I had the first intelligence, naturally." And the speaker smiled the same odd smile again.

"Who are you?" suddenly asked Faucit, very shortly and sharply; as if half in the mood for a quarrel.

"I have told you," answered the other, with the simplest frankness—"the Count Lestrange. You needn't have sent for me if you didn't want me."

"Sent for you! nonsense. Why did you come here? What do you mean? Did you say that my uncle was dead? did you say that I am his heir?"

"I said so, certainly."

Faucit came straight up to him, sate again on the

chair he had left, rested his left elbow on the table, and looked over it.

"You don't look as if you were joking; and I warn you it might be a bad joke."

"I never joke," answered the Count, quite unruffled. "Why should I? it's such an inferior amusement. You are the happy owner of forty thousand a year."

"Will you swear that this is true?" asked Faucit, his teeth setting as he spoke, and his face looking very strong.

"I will. I swear that it's true."

There was a pause of some moments—one of those pauses which seem all silence, all round and everywhere. The strange Count might have cast a glamour over the whole place. A sudden cloud-rack had for a time darkened the September brightness, and the old ruin seemed napping in the shade. A few sheep-bells outside set the silence off. Frisco had grown quite quiet, and might have been fascinated. And the throbbing of Faucit's heart seemed to him as loud as the sheep-bells.

"I can't realize it," he said, when the silence became pain.

"You will," said Lestrange, looking at him. "Think it over."

He got up, laid his right hand lightly and with a sort of patronage on Faucit's shoulder, passed him by as he buried his head in both his hands, then crossed to the old lancet-arch, and leaned against the buttress, watching the other with a smile.

CHAPTER IV.

IN GOOD SOCIETY.

"WELL!" There had been another and a longer pause before the Count spoke again. "I have given you the first thing you wanted, and the most important."

"Yes," said Faucit bitterly; and a whole history seemed to have passed over his face. "Money buys everything."

"Vulgar error again; it doesn't. But it buys that which does buy everything—opportunity. Opportunity makes friends, love, everything, and the best that can be made, for those that care for them; and all opportunities are open to the rich man, who has the brains and the wish to use them."

The strange philosopher was speaking very freely and pleasantly now, with a careless kind of cheer-

fulness which had its effect upon his listener, who smiled.

"I suppose that's true," he said.

"Of course it is. The talk about bargain and sale in hearts is overdone, like every other talk now-a-days; and I say nothing of sham love, which of course can be bought, but it isn't worth it. But a woman has a thousand opportunities of loving a rich man where she has one of loving a poor one; and the lovable rich man wins love—real love, such as it is—where the lovable poor man fails. Opportunity. Am I boring you?"

"No, indeed. I'm glad to listen."

"The same with friends. A fool, rich or poor, doesn't make real friends. But if a good fellow be rich, he can give dinners, lend horses, and display his qualities. That makes friends:—real friends. Opportunity."

"But opportunity cannot buy youth," said the other, shaking his head.

"Pardon me," said the Count, in the same cheery tone. "Given a good constitution, it secures the means of managing it. And that is health; and health is youth. Q. E. D."

The speaker was still leaning against the arch, and

beheading with his riding-whip some of the taller of the wild grasses which grew in rank luxuriance about it. Faucit, as he turned round in his chair, and nursing his knee with his two hands, looked at his visitor, remembered his Roman history, and thought of Tarquin. The oddest associations, the most incongruous memories and ideas, were jostling each other in his puzzled brain. The whole scene and its surroundings were so strange: he had been living of late so unreal and unhuman a life, —he to whom in the old days the company of good friends and good cheer had been half himself,— and, above all, the feeling that in spite of himself he did not resent the intrusion of this singular stranger with the Satanic credentials, was strong upon him. As for the news of the fortune, he could make nothing of it yet, beyond the feeling that from this moment his life was in some way changed. He could not go on playing at hermit on forty thousand a-year.

"Whoever you are," he said to Lestrange enquiringly, in comment upon his last theorem, "you seem to have thought of these things."

"Of course I have," was the answer, as the riding-whip brought down an unusually tall specimen, which looked like a chief of his tribe. "Money's no use to

me; but I have as much youth as I want, as many friends as I want, and more love than I want. It's troublesome sometimes," he added in a lower voice, more to himself than his companion, whistling thoughtfully between his teeth.

A woman's voice came from outside at the moment —a rather hard and worn voice, but a gentlewoman's.

"This way," were the words addressed to some one with the speaker; "through the arch here."

"How odd!" said Lestrange, with a soft laugh, and stroking his moustache. He turned round to Faucit and came back to him. "That's Lady Luscombe," he said to him with quiet emphasis; "an excellent woman and a good friend. Here is your opportunity; use it—and buy her!"

Lady Luscombe's face, as she came in through the arch, was like the voice which had heralded it—rather hard and worn. Yet it was a sad and handsome and not unkindly face—the face of a woman of forty, with the well-preserved figure of ten or twelve years less, and with features good and regular. The nose was aquiline in shape, and the complexion, especially round the cheek-bones, rather high. The eyes were of a light gray, wandering and distressful, but honest enough, and

expressing the general sadness of the face like an omen. Her smile was pretty when it came, which was rarely; and she was softly dressed, in grays and laces. The hair was smooth and abundant; but white—quite white. She looked like a woman who had fought the battle of life, and lost it.

The two companions who were with her made a strange contrast. One was a rotund and rubicund matron some ten or fifteen years older than she, with an expression of the most absolute good-nature, exhaustive and exhausting. She had no features, so they need not be described. Audrey's question—"Lord warrant us! what features?" might sum up a good many people besides Lady Pepperharrow.

The chief impression left by her on the mind was a gorgeous daring of costume, in which the most pronounced combinations of red, green, and yellow resulted in a vague whole suggestive of a Bird of Paradise. As "The Bird," indeed, she was consequently known to Beauty Gosling and his set. Beauty had a knack for nicknames, and bestowed them freely. He had also been known to christen Lady Pepperharrow as "the h-less one," with reference to a weakness of hers which she rather impressed upon her friends.

The late Sir Ugh Pepperarrow, who had been very properly knighted for boiling soap in unusual quantities, was a great trial to his relict at the start of his name, and again half way through. Nobody quite knew why Lady Pepperharrow was fashionable, but she was. That she was a guest of Lady Luscombe in itself showed that: so did it that she and her hostess were now escorted by Lord Viscount Pentonville, who could make any social coin current which he chose to favour, whatever its metal.

Pentonville had ruined the domestic happiness, Gosling used to say, of more husbands than any man else since the days of Don Juan, through a new Don Juanism of his own, of a kind unimpeachably moral. He took up young married women and posed them as beauties, supplying a new one where his unfailing instinct detected satiety beforehand. It was whispered indeed that he was secretly connected with two or three of the leading photographers' houses, by a financial arrangement convenient to both sides. And it was more than whispered that he was the author, subject to editorial correction as regarded the English, of the social paragraphs, dealing with these ladies' dresses and private lives, which were the principal attraction of

those two flourishing weekly newspapers avowedly established for the purification of society,—"Peep Hole," and "The Flunkey."

Lord Pentonville, however, was not a recognized author, and in the excess of his modesty never signed his name to anything he wrote; the privileges of the English press, of which Englishmen are so tenacious and so justly proud, entitling him therefore to deny his own works when advisable. Indeed, as his editor, technically speaking, wrote his articles for him, he considered that he kept on the windy side of the divine law in exercising his privilege.

The fabulous number of years attributed to his Lordship by Gosling was justified by the appearance of his face, which was wrinkled and puckered and needle-scored to an extent which made him look as if he had been engaged in a long prize-fight with Time. He wore a pronounced and defiant little wig, which he flattered himself baffled observation. From a subtle study of the processes of Nature, he had it made white, added an incipient baldness at the temples, then dyed it to a rich brown, then greased it well with the fashionable unguent of the day, and felt himself a power. The effect was to the last degree weird and wiglike.

Lord Pentonville was very short-sighted, but despised eye-glasses; and peered into people's faces, after a method quite his own, with a little pair of oysterous eyes of no particular colour. He had to stand on tiptoe to do it, in most cases, for he was most diminutive, and his walk resembled a sort of little trot, the oddness of which was increased by the tight trousers which he always wore strapped over his shiny and corn-producing boots.

Gosling maintained that old Pen was obliged to trot and to strap, because he must fall to pieces if he didn't, like the cab-horse in Leech's picture, which tumbled down directly it was taken out of harness. Such as he was, however, a very great man and arbiter of society was little Lord Pentonville, the glass of fashion with his own mould of form.

"This will be the very place for the picnic, I think, Lord Pentonville," said Lady Luscombe, as the three entered the quadrangle, in a rather tired and uninterested tone.

The two men who had watched them enter had drawn back a little into the angle of the ruin, and were not at first seen by the new-comers.

"Ca—ca—capital," answered his Lordship, who was

balbic of speech, and kept an old sort of tune to his trot in his talk. He had a way of stumbling over his first word, and bringing out the rest with a rush, like a man who has broken a fence down. "I'll tell them to bring the hampers at once. P—plenty of animals, and no p—ossible place to sit down."

"How ot it is," sighed Lady Pepperharrow, fatly. "It's a odd place too. But, Lady Luscombe, do look at the colouring. It quite reminds me of the old masters. Such wonderful people as those old masters were, you know. Not but that I think dear Mr. Long Locke's beautiful paintings quite as appy in their way. His renderings of the light and shade are so bold. You quite wonder where he gets them from."

"From science, dear Lady Pepperharrow," said Lestrange, coming forward. "Science is the modern alkali, by which we learn to correct the too pronounced acids of Nature and Religion."

"Dear me, yes, Count Lestrange," answered the lady. "You always say such clever things. But then everybody hasn't your gifts. And I wish you wouldn't say anything uncomfortable about religion. I'm sure I don't know what I should do without it, and without the comfort of dear Mr. Birmingham Pope's prayers.

He always dresses so beautifully, that I am sure they are always answered."

"Always?" said Lestrange. "Surely he prays every day, and as fervently as for everything else, that all the nobility may be endued with grace, wisdom, and understanding. That prayer has not been answered yet—at least to the full extent," he added, glancing at Pentonville, who was contentedly absorbed in various little trots of discovery about the quadrangle.

"There's somebody here," said he, peering. None of his senses were exceptionally quick.

"It's Count Lestrange," said Lady Luscombe in a low voice. Her expression had suddenly flashed into life when she saw the Count. There was a strange interest in it, and a stranger fear. "Have the riders arrived then?" she said to Lestrange.

"Not yet," he answered, with a shade of familiarity in his tone. It was but a shade; for by shades only did his voice or his face vary. "I came on before the rest to have some talk with a friend of mine. This," he said, pointing to Faucit without further prelude, "is the Hermit of the Owl's Nest, of whom you have all heard. We were speaking of him at dinner last night." Faucit came a little forward and bowed

gravely. But he turned his face away as much as he could from Lady Pepperharrow. He had given a slight start when first he saw her, and had watched her unobserved with an expression upon his face which gave evidence of strange associations. It was something which had in it an echo of tenderness. As for the lady, she had paid him no attention. She and Lady Luscombe now acknowledged the bow with some surprise, and Pentonville peered.

"That old f—f—f—" he began to ask, turning to the Count.

Faucit winced.

"Fellow?" suggested Lestrange quietly.

"No, person!" snapped Pentonville, like the shot of a saloon-pistol.

He resented assistance.

"Let me introduce him more formally," said the Count.

"No—not now," said Faucit to him in a low voice and hurriedly.

"Nonsense!" the other answered, in the same tone. "What did I tell you about opportunity? Lady Luscombe—Lady Pepperharrow—Lord Pentonville, let me introduce—"

"Any friend of yours, of course," said Lady Luscombe, constrainedly.

"He is sure to be so distinguished," murmured the other lady, with a patronizing sigh, which brought a strange smile into Faucit's face.

"Let me introduce my friend—"

"Fraser," said Faucit in the same manner again.

Lestrange smiled.

"Mr. Fraser," he said, with the gesture devoted by Fashion to an introduction. "Better so at present," he added to himself, looking at his ring. "It suits my own views precisely."

"D—d—d—delighted, I'm sure, quite delighted!" said the peer, rushing at the colossal Fraser, standing very much on tiptoe indeed, and inspecting his new acquaintance's middle shirt-button. After which examination he shook hands inquisitively, buttonholed the Hermit at the same level, and became confidential.

"Ask him to join the picnic," said Lestrange to Lady Luscombe, still engaged with his ring.

"Your whims are endless," she answered.

"Humour them. Ask him." And the request was like Queen Elizabeth's to Sussex.

"That Mr. Fraser!" she said, hesitatingly, and puzzled, as she looked at the rough unpicnic-like figure before her.

"That Mr. Fraser," he repeated emphatically. "Wasn't it with that object we came here? You remember your promise?" he added, and the brows knit a little.

"To ask him—first to the picnic, and afterwards to stay at the Abbey. Yes; but—I hadn't understood. He is so strange-looking a man."

"At present. We will remedy that."

She looked at Lestrange.

"Tell me your object," she said abruptly, and after a pause.

"When it is gained. I beg of you—"

"Really, Lestrange,—"

"I beg of you." And he emphasized the second word very courteously, but more markedly than he often did. And as he did so he took her hand and kissed it. Nobody else heard the dialogue.

"When you ask like that—" she said, slowly.

"You can't refuse me. I know your kindness. Thank you." He kissed the thin, well-shaped hand again, and turned away.

Lady Luscombe stood still for an instant, then went up to Faucit, an imperceptible shudder coming over her.

"You are the gentleman who has come to live in those ruins, Mr. Fraser?" she said.

"I don't exactly live in them, Lady Luscombe," was the answer, given in a very honest and straightforward fashion. Nobody could mistake the thorough gentleman, and Lady Luscombe did not.

"Don't you?" she said. "I thought you did."

"Such a sweet place for a romantic mind," interjected the soap-boiler's memorial, whose eye Faucit avoided throughout.

"Eg—g—g—gad! I should think he'd be more likely to die in 'em! Most extrorny taste at your age; I shouldn't like it even at mine! Don't you find it devilish dra—dra—dra—"

"Draughty?" said Faucit, shortly.

"No, windy!" And his Lordship trotted off to Lestrange. "D—devilish odd taste, isn't it?" he confided.

"Devilish tastes are for hot temperatures, you know," said Lestrange.

"Ah—y—yes—of course."

Hard Labour retired uncomfortable, and tumbled over Frisco, taking his hat off and apologizing immediately: "I b—b—beg your pardon," he said, and peered again. "D—damn it, it's a dog!"

Frisco, who had retired into a corner and given up the whole thing as beyond his comprehension, accepted the apology with much self-restraint, and a wag of his tail.

"We have made up a picnic here to-day," said Lady Luscombe, continuing the conversation she had been holding with the supposed Fraser, "and it will give us much pleasure if you will join it. My party will be here directly."

"Picnics are not much in my way," he answered. "I don't look like it."

"Still, if you would. But if you don't feel disposed—"

"I will dispose him," Lestrange interrupted.

Lady Luscombe drew back.

"Then I leave him to you," she said, disguising an uneasy look. "Lord Pentonville, will you explain to the servants what place we have chosen."

"C—c—certainly!" answered Pentonville, with an air of extreme agility, as he trotted out through the

arch. "You are too exacting, Lestrange," she whispered under her breath.

"They say—that love is always exacting."

"Love!" She threw volumes into the word. "Lady Pepperharrow, will you come and look for the others?"

The two men were alone again together.

CHAPTER V.

THE COMPACT AND THE VISION.

"WELL, you will join the picnic?" said Lestrange.

"No, not I."

"I think you will, for all that."

"I dislike that style of people more than I ever did," said Faucit impatiently. "There's a sort of ridiculous assumption about them, as if one were a clay of an inferior kind, made by a different manufacturer. It irritates me, and I don't like it."

"Perhaps the manufacturer is different," observed Lestrange. "It is difficult to think that a man like yourself, and a Pentonville, are turned out by the same hand. I should be inclined to attribute him to the classic Demiurgus; unless," he added, reflectively, "I had something to do with him myself."

"It's just the inferiority of the creature that

makes assumption so enraging. I wanted to kick him."

"That is a very improper frame of a mind for a hermit," said Lestrange. "It's a poor little snob, no doubt. But snub downwards is snub upwards, and he gets as much moral kicking from one side as he gives on the other. It's all very even. An odd country this England of yours, where everybody seems to be saying, 'Please find me somebody's boots to lick, and bring somebody else to lick mine.' I happened to be the other day in a picture-gallery, near a princess of the blood-royal, some degrees removed. She had with her her little girl, aged five, necessarily another degree removed. To them enter, as the stage-directions say, two fashionably-dressed young ladies. A mixture of awe and gratification filled their lovely eyes, and each bobbed twice—I cannot call it bowing, for it was an odd jerky motion effected by the crooking of one knee —to the great lady. Then they left-about-faced, and bobbed again, positively, to the little girl—the crook being a shade less hooky. It was a very touching sight; and I was as much amused by the quiet look of fun in the princess's face, a very bonny, good-natured looking woman by the way, as by anything else in the little scene."

"Who were the bobbers?" said Faucit. "Ladies'-maids?"

"Oh, dear, no. They were the beautiful ladies Diana and Castalia Coldharbour, daughters of the Duke of Freezeland, whose ancestors came over with the Conqueror. It's the old story of the bigger and lesser fleas. If you spoke to those girls, they would chill you with a look. The blueness of their blood suggests an underdone joint. It was never even warmed through."

Faucit laughed a good deal. "Yes, it's all very funny," he said; "and I confess I'm out of it. Why on earth did your friend Lady Luscombe ask me to join her picnic?"

"Because you are not justified in being 'out of it' any longer. Because you've got forty thousand a year."

"Does she know that too?" asked Faucit, astonished.

"Yes," said the Count. "I told her."

"What on earth, and why on earth—"

"What business is it of mine, and why should I interfere? You needn't be angry with me; I haven't used an unpleasant means of introduction, have I? and I don't even charge a commission."

The man's good breeding was so perfect, and his easy familiarity so free from any suspicion of discourtesy,

that a less well-tempered man than Faucit was couldn't have taken offence if he had tried. Faucit was not inclined to try. Apart altogether from this proffered fortune, which was like a vision of fable-land, he was thoroughly interested and held by the conversation and manners of his new acquaintance.

"Then your Lady Luscombe wouldn't have asked me, if it hadn't been for this fortune-in-the-air?"

"In the air, eh? you'll find most of it in a very solid form. No, she wouldn't; why should she? She has a niece to marry," said the Count, looking down and trimming his nails.

"Oh, is that all? Only another edition of the eternal old story. A girl to sell—wanted a purchaser. I'm sick of all that, and have heard far too much of it; and I don't buy damaged goods, or any other goods either. Her ladyship is early in the slave-market, no doubt, but she's too late for all that. I don't want to have anything to do with her niece, her picnic, or her."

Faucit hadn't said so many words in a speech for a long time; and Frisco, whom he was accustomed to talk with in the fondest but fewest monosyllables, looked up from his ruminative attitude in the corner with

undisguised wonder at the new ring of the familiar voice. Then his eyes fixed themselves again on Lestrange's unmoved face, with every evidence of much inward exercise. If one may attempt to explore into the course of a dog's thoughts, he had begun to conquer his first violent prepossession against the Count, on discovering how his master gradually thawed in his company; but was now, in spite of himself, coming back to his original feeling. It is much the same with us. We take an instinctive dislike, feel that we must be wrong, argue ourselves out of it, and are quite on good terms for a time; then suddenly and helplessly relapse, to dislike for evermore, and to give up struggling against it. Very often, too, it is some sudden exhibition of moral shadiness on the other side which explains and justifies the relapse. The other side, perhaps, says the same of us. Therein instinct proves itself a truer thing than reason, and begins new matter of speculation as to the real positions of the different animals, man included, in the scale of intelligence. Faucit himself, among the various literary torsos which at one time he had accumulated in his drawers, had written a good part of an empiric essay—'On the Causes of Johnson's Dislike for Dr. Fell.'

For the present, however, a quiet rebuke from the Count was the only result of the other's outbreak.

"In the new career which is opening for you, my dear fellow," he said, "I strongly recommend you to avoid misanthropy. It's a common assumption, and neither real nor wise. Amuse yourselves with your fellow-creatures, make friends with them, make use of them, make all you can of them, but don't always impute bad motives to them. Our motives are like ourselves, a mixture."

"It strikes me that you imputed the bad motive," said Faucit, laughing. "The lecture comes badly."

"I beg your pardon," answered Lestrange. "I stated a fact, and you instantly drew a misanthropic inference. Nor did I suggest that the motive, if it be one, was bad. It strikes me as exemplary. Miss Caroline Beaufort is a very nice little girl, and you look as if you ought to make a model husband. What can an aunt do better? Come to the picnic."

"Indeed, I'll do nothing of the kind."

"Well, stay here with me a little longer, and it will come to you. Don't move; you mean to join it."

"Eh?" said the other.

"I read acceptance in your face, and I can tell you

the reason. Your little tirade just now was a disguised farewell to the stylitic life, and to roots and water. You are tired of misanthropy as a profession."

"Do you really want to persuade me," said the recluse, "that you are so fond of your fellow-creatures?"

"I said nothing of the kind," answered the other. "The operations of your mind are electric. Between affection and aversion there are many shades of feeling. Now you are going back into the world, cultivate indifference. Will you take me for your mentor?"

"I suspect," said Faucit, "that you would soon have enough of me. We are men of a very different sort."

"All the more likely to agree. If I propose to take the mentorship, it is to serve us both. My knowledge of the physical, and still more of what I may call the moral geography of what is known as the world, is, though I say it, oddly varied and complete. I keep a sort of chart of all the reefs and shoals, and I know a lighthouse when I see it, also if it is given to revolving. I know when the appearance of solidity is deceitful; how thin and how many the strata underneath. I can distinguish the soil which only wants surface-draining

from that which is barren at heart for evermore. I have also—having set myself early to acquire it—a singular power and influence over the wills of men. I can be of great use to you, Faucit, in launching you in the world (and there is thus much gained already, that I hear no more objections); and I am interested in you for reasons which I can explain later."

"Tell me one," said the other, on whom the fascination was growing.

Lestrange hesitated a little, and looked a little away.

"For one thing—I knew your father," he said.

"Who died when I was a child?"

"Yes. And was very kind to me when I was one."

"The introduction is quite enough," said Faucit, rising from the grass, on which he had thrown himself down to listen. And he said it with relief in his voice, as if it were a pleasure to feel that he had an excuse for encouraging this self-presented acquaintance. "Why didn't you say it at first? Let us be friends."

He held out his hand to Lestrange, and the two men shook hands. The small nervous fingers disappeared in the other's large grasp, and Frisco, with a slight wag of the tail, and an inaudible growl, witnessed the compact

then and there made between the Count Lestrange of the one part, and Guy Faucit, sometime called Fraser, of the other, signed, sealed, and delivered in the dog's presence that blank day of September, in the ruins of the Owl's Nest.

*   *   *   *   *   *   *

"I don't see yet, however," said Guy Faucit, "of what service I can be to you."

"You will be to me," answered Lestrange smilingly, "what the Lord Viscount Pentonville's beauties are to the Lord Viscount Pentonville. He produces them, and he shines by the reflection of their graces, and in the coruscation of their photographs. Why shouldn't I speculate in a man, as he does in a woman? Men are a much better investment, and more interesting altogether. Besides, are your powers of imputation disappearing already? You are a rich man and I am a poor one; and you can serve me in thousands of ways."

"That's true, of course," answered Faucit; "and I'm sure I shall be very glad. You're worth it. But the sweetbread comes just in time to mumble, for I've few enough teeth left. I'm old to invest in."

"Nonsense," said the Count, cheerily. "Youth was one of the commodities you were asking for just now;

and with money and friends I have brought it you. What can you want, to begin with, younger than a picnic, and Lord Pentonville?"

"Who is good enough to take me to be older than himself," said Guy, rather angrily.

"Yes," said Lestrange, observant and amused; "I don't think you look so," he added drily, measuring the man's broad proportions with his eye, which had a touch of envy in it. "What an athlete you must have been." The eye twinkled, and the smoke curled up, for Lestrange had lighted another cigar, being seldom without one.

"Must have been! I am."

Guy Faucit followed the instinct of strong health and a strong frame, took a long draught of the bright moorland air into his lungs, expanded them, hit out with both his arms, and then played "double attack" with them on his big chest, which answered to the summons like a mellow cathedral bell, some such celebrity as Tom of Lincoln. Lestrange fairly laughed out, on a note distinctly louder than he had yet allowed his voice to take, bating no jot of its music.

"Vanity, eh?" he said, still laughing. "You're young enough."

"Not for picnics and fashionables, hanged if I am," answered Guy, suddenly forgetting his personality. "After all, Count Lestrange, I don't know who you are, or why you take so great an interest in me. But though our introduction has been a strange one by ordinary rules, I shall be glad to have any amount of talk with you, if you care about it. Who wouldn't? There isn't much in my talk; but I can't stand your Pentonvilles, and that sort of people. I'll see you whenever you like, but d—n your friends."

"Of course—that's my object," said Lestrange.

Faucit couldn't help laughing, and laughed in spite of himself.

"You won't join us, then?" the Count went on. "Money and youth don't tempt you. What about revenge, and love?"

"I don't really want revenge," the other said, gravely; "that was a momentary thought. 'I will chide no dweller in the world but myself, against whom I know most faults.' No, I don't want revenge; I'm not so bad as that."

"As to want revenge? it's a very natural need, and a very healthy passion; much healthier than love."

"Love!" Guy said, with utter bitterness in his

voice. "The sort of love that fine ladies, with nieces to marry, come dinners-in-hand to offer you! I put my own meaning on that insulted word, Count Lestrange; and I've done with it once for all."

"So much the better for you," was the answer. "You must be a very exceptionally lucky man to be able to put a limit on the illimitable. But I don't believe it, I'm sorry to say; for I can't imagine that I have met the impossible for the first time, after all my experience. Why were you asking for love just now, Faucit, if you don't want it?"

"All men wish to be loved—sometimes," said the other, very slowly and dreamily, with his eyes turned into some unforgotten past.

"Do they? It's not bad,—if they can't make themselves feared;" slowly on his side, and very low and clear.

"Feared!" echoed Faucit. "I've no desire for that."

"It's much more useful," said Lestrange, communing with his cigar. "People will do some things for those they love, everything for those they fear."

Once more the same uncanny note might have been heard in the voice; and once more Guy Faucit's straightforward nature took the alarm.

"You might be a dangerous mentor for a younger man than myself, Count Lestrange," he said; "but such as I am my creeds are formed. One might almost think you had studied philosophy with the master you assumed just now. Yes, my creed is formed; and as one of its first articles, I believe in love,—God help me, though I have done with it long ago."

There was a pause on both sides, and on both sides the "interval of sound" was filled by tobacco-smoke.

"Yes?" then Lestrange said, quietly. "Tell me the story."

He spoke with an evidence of interest; for he saw in the face of the other the longing to speak which possesses us all at times, most of all after long-enforced repression. And Guy Faucit had kept his counsel for many solitary years; nor had any one till now had the power to make him break it. He had been tempted often, on ship-board and in bush-land, in strange cities and stranger settlements, amongst the various companions, rough and gentle, with whom he had from time to time consorted, to break the spell of silence which became now and again almost intolerable. But the hour and the man had never come till now. Nor now had he much to say.

"Shall I?" he said, drawing at his pipe and looking straight before him. He spoke more to himself than to the other, and dropped his sentences one by one, as if they were wrung from him with a sort of pain. "The story's a very old one. I cared once for a girl, who—as I thought—cared for me. It began ten years ago, and it ended eight. My mother warned me that she might be frivolous and heartless, and of course I didn't believe her. Of course my mother was right. It was just at the time of my mother's death,—when I had gone down from London and seen her die,—when I most wanted love and help—"

The pause lengthened, and Lestrange remarked quietly—

"Just the time when they fail. Yes?"

"It was then that I heard that the girl had thrown me over for some rich man or another. Nothing very new, is it? That's all."

He got up from his seat with a sigh half of relief, knocked the ashes from his pipe, and walked slowly to the opposite corner of the quadrangle; there he stood looking on the ground, and tapping the grass absently with his foot. More and more and more, the afternoon shadows crept slowly over the scene.

"And you have never seen her or heard of her since?" Lestrange said, watching the set face closely.

"Never."

Guy spoke the word between his teeth, and the shadow that fell on him for the moment was not quite good to see.

"Should you like to do so?" asked the Count, after another pause.

Faucit started, as if a new train of thought had followed on the last. He took counsel in his heart before he answered, and seemed to be arguing out something with himself behind his knitted brows. Then he said curtly—"Yes."

Lestrange took a small photograph from his pocket, and held it out to Guy. "Is that anything like her?"

Guy Faucit looked at the other for a space as if he did not understand, then took the portrait from him. All the blood rushed straight from the face to the heart, leaving the giant for a moment as colourless as a dying man; then rushed back again with a strong reinforcement, and overflowed cheek, and throat, and forehead. His eyes seemed literally to fasten upon the picture before him, and the tempest that shook the

man all through seemed for a moment as if it would throw him from his feet.

"How did you get this?" he said, and in a whisper.

The Count paid no apparent attention to the emotion of his companion, but treated the whole matter with the same pleasant air of commonplace. "I like," he said, placidly, "to keep the portraits of people who interest me."

"But what is it?" insisted the other, still in a voice not his own. "It is herself. Where is she?"

It was not from Lestrange that the immediate answer came. Suddenly, from the road behind, a woman's laugh rang out upon the ear, like a silver peal of bells of infinite beauty, in which one of the bells, perhaps, has gone a little bit wrong, and caught a note not quite the others' in the strain. It came without warning, and went crisply through the air. A quick smile flitted over Lestrange's face as he slightly raised his eyebrows and twisted his ring, and half muttered to himself, "Curious. I'm always in the right time."

Upon Guy Faucit the effect of the sound was startling. He literally staggered on his feet, turned again as ashy pale as a snow-drift looks in a dull twilight,

and fell back against a projecting part of the wall, behind Lestrange, breathing hard and quick, and like a hunted man. His eyes were fixed upon the road, over Lestrange's shoulder, with half a hope and half a terror in them. Full upon the little knoll behind the road, bathed in a capricious sunbeam which flashed out to frame the picture, sprang and stood the figure of a very beautiful young woman, one of the daughters of the gods, divinely tall and divinely fair as Helen of Troy herself. And a Helen of Troy she might be, worthy a ten years' siege. The full but lithe figure was fitted to a marvel by the shapely blue riding-habit she wore, and the little man's hat, coquettishly worn aside, took the station of Mercury on the mass of soft fair hair, seasoned with countless threads of sunny gold. The complexion was of the pure marble white which is surely the most perfect of all complexions—the veined white of the statue-world, which suggests delicacy of constitution till the flash of interest or of exercise belies the charge. The firm and well-cut hands, not too large for beauty, but not too small for use, were carefully gloved in becoming gauntlets, and one of them had gathered up the habit's folds, while the other tapped her boot with the whip it held.

"All who love me, follow me!" she said out in a laughing voice, apparently to some one behind her. And she stood as upright as a dart, and looked down like Galatea from her pedestal upon the two men in the foreground. Or rather upon one of them. For Lestrange, as the vision appeared, answered the other's last question quietly.

"There she is," he said; and with an imperceptible movement placed himself more completely between them. If his object was to keep Guy out of sight he might have saved himself the pains. For after one long deep look, which seemed to take the picture into the very framework of his heart, to stay there for ever, Guy Faucit fell back, like a man utterly dazed and overcome, into the angle of the ruin which screened him from every part of the road, with one set, yearning, stifled cry—"Good God!"

CHAPTER VI.

DAISY BRENT.

THE visitor shaded her eyes with her raised hand, and looked into the quiet quadrangle, from the centre of which the Count Lestrange was directly facing her. Of the other figure she saw nothing, and nothing of the strange drama which was passing there. Before anything was said, Frisco struck a sort of preliminary note by shaking his head, and crossing quietly to the angle where his master was, to take his place beside him.

"Ah, Mrs. Brent!" said Lestrange, raising his voice without any perceptible modification of the tone, and speaking with familiar acknowledgment.

"The wandering Jew!" laughed she, nodding to the speaker with a manner not indicating any special respect.

> "'Und aber nach funf hündert Jahren
> Will ich desselbigen Weges fahren.'

"Shall I translate it for you?" she added.

'And when five hundred years are o'er,
I'll travel the self-same road once more.'"

"I never want to be translated to."

"I know you don't, and apologize. I believe you are the inventor of language; but you always look in your element in out-of-the-way places, most romantic and Byronic of men. What plot are you constructing down there, Manfred?"

"You know as well as I do, as, like the rest of the world, I only act under your ladyship's orders. I'm constructing a picnic."

"Have you found a good place?" she asked; "one where my satellites will show to advantage?"

"Capital, I think," he answered. "Look about you from your point of vantage, and admit that I have done my spiriting well."

Count Lestrange went towards the parapet, and with a rapid motion of the hand signed to Faucit to keep his post. There was no fear of his leaving it, for his eyes having done their part over Lestrange's shoulder, his ears were now drinking in the sound of the rider's voice. Did he remember it as he heard it now? or did his quick sense detect in it, even in the few

syllables of courteous badinage which were passing between her and the Count, something curiously different from a voice which had once been the music to which his life was set, and had left its melody behind with him wherever he had gone? There must have been something of this last discovery, and something in it which even in its sadness was not all pain. Were there others in the world who could have suffered as he, and why?

Meanwhile the Count was leaning carelessly over the parapet upon his elbow, looking up at her whom he had called Mrs. Brent, and she was taking in the scene with evident enjoyment of its rich and quiet beauty.

"Did I not see some one with you?" she asked.

"With me? why?"

"Another of your bad habits, Count. Like the Quakers, you are always answering one question by another. I fancied I caught sight of a figure in the background, which vanished at my coming like a ghost with a bad conscience. Perhaps it was a phantom herdsman who haunts the ruins, as he is no more to be seen. I oughtn't to drive even a ghost away, ought I?"

"You ought to bring him back to flesh and blood," said Lestrange. "If I were a ghost I should revive at the sight of you, I'm sure," he added, with a shade of admiration in his tone which failed to reach Faucit, but did not escape the quick ear of the woman, better versed in the fashions of Lestrange.

"I'm not sure that you are not a ghost," she said hastily, "of some uncomfortable vampiric order. Only if you rose you would never do it like other ghosts, but come up sideways like the creature in the 'Corsican Brothers.' However, I'm not going to stop here all day, stuck up on a mound like a Chinese idol. If you have found the right place for the picnic, well and good; and it looks most interesting and mysterious, made to set you off to advantage, and in every respect the correct thing. O dear! I wonder if there is anything there that will interest me?"

"I think so," said Lestrange, very quietly.

"Then I shall be with you like a flash of lightning," answered she, laughing, "followed by my thunder, at a long distance."

"Who's your thunder?" asked the Count, laughing too.

"My swells! slow, but sure to be after me." And

she burst into a brighter and merrier laugh than before, which had in it an infinite grace of girlishness and innocence too, and seemed weighted with less of years than might have been guessed in her before. It was the laugh of a woman "with no harm in her," if ever there was one; and on Faucit's listening face there was an expression which was a sort of silent echo of the laugh he heard. There was relief in it, and somehow he looked younger, too. Just before, as the lady was rattling on, he had muttered to himself, "How changed!" Now his face had even something of a smile to answer to her laughter. And so quick, so singular was the observation of Lestrange that he did not fail to catch the look, as he turned his head in a moment from the knoll where the one stood, to glance at the corner where the other was hidden. Meantime the skirts were more daintily gathered up in the left hand, and the right waved a laughing farewell.

"In five minutes!" she said; and with the spring of elastic youth the pleasant figure had vanished from the knoll, and was gone, before the echo of that silver laugh had quite died under the moss-grown eaves. Even Frisco had raised his head to acknowledge it, with an indication of a wag of the tail. An odd silence

between the two men, with whom such intervals were growing common, followed for a time before either moved or spoke. Lestrange was still leaning over the parapet, and looking after the figure that had just left them, watching her, perhaps, at some little distance, swung lightly to the saddle at the mere touch of a helping hand, and with strange thoughts in his mind, which gave no outward sign other than an expression of greater impenetrableness on the secretive face. Slowly he lighted another cigar, while the other man, full of his strange thoughts too, was coming as slowly to himself. Frisco, coming close to him and whining for notice, and at last taking the unusual step of tattooing Faucit's chest with his fore-paws, first produced a change of attitude. Guy patted him kindly on the head, then stooping, bestowed a welcome caress on his neck, and coming back to the table where he had been sitting when Lestrange appeared, he too immediately consulted the Delphic oracle of modern days, and held fiery communion with his pipe.

"What is she?" presently he said, shortly, and without further prelude, not looking away from the table.

"Mrs. Brent; a social celebrity, and the flower of

Lady Luscombe's party," answered Lestrange, not turning his head either, but keeping it fixed upon the road beyond.

"Married?—or a widow?" And the reply, which was a little time coming, was waited for between two whiffs, the pipe showing no sign of life.

"Married."

"Ah." The head sank a little forward as the suspended whiff came. "Where's her husband?"—abruptly.

"Where husbands should be—in India."

"Who is he?"

"Mr. Brent," said Lestrange; and he turned away from the road and left the parapet, the impenetrable look seeming to deepen as he did so, and seated himself once more at the table opposite to the recluse. Then he went on sentence by sentence, dropping them with the same crystal clearness and deliberation, but apparent absence of any marked intention, as before. "A bad husband—he treats her abominably. He was rich, and lost his fortune in speculation. She lives with Lady Pepperharrow as a kind of ward—and stays a good deal at Luscombe Abbey. She is not well off."

The last sentence was more deliberate than the

rest, and marked by a quiet disentangling of the ashes of the cigar.

"Has she no relations to take care of her?"

"One—a brother."

"In the army, I think?"

"In the army." Lestrange took no notice of the knowledge of facts implied.

"Isn't he with her?"

"No; he is with his regiment. I don't think he's a very attentive brother." And the two smoked on.

Presently Guy rose and walked down the quadrangle.

"Count Lestrange, I'll join the picnic," he said.

"That's right," answered the other pleasantly. "I am glad to see that you fall in with my views, as I thought you would. Hermitry must be such a bore if persevered in, the essence of life being variety. It is only useful to digest experiences; for when they are assimilated we want to swallow fresh ones. But, by the way, don't call me Count Lestrange. Nobody does except my man Chaffers, and I don't like it."

"What am I to call you?"

"Lestrange, of course. The sooner we get upon the familiar terms agreed upon, the better for the prospects

of our meditated fellowship. I can accept my mentorship upon no condition but that of absolute equality."

"Very well," said Guy, who was scarcely listening, as the Count was well aware as he talked on.

He left Guy to his reverie for a short time, watching him in silence, or making some trivial remark, not wanting an answer, till, looking out from the quadrangle again, he saw the figure of a man on the road, to whom he beckoned quietly. Then he went up to Guy Faucit and brought him back to reality.

"Faucit," he said.

"Yes?"

"Are you going to picnic like that?"

"How else?" answered Guy. But as he spoke his eye turned to his rough and uncourtier-like dress and appearance, and he shrugged his shoulders. "I am not very fit for fashion, I suppose."

"Well, the fashions have no doubt changed to a certain extent since those clothes were made. Have you no others?"

"Yes, at my cottage."

"Suppose you go and put them on."

"Eh?"

"It's as well to do yourself justice, isn't it?

As mentor, may I venture on a further piece of advice?"

"Certainly. What? After all this dress suits my shaggy personality better than any other."

"Exactly. Don't adapt the dress to the personality—but the personality to the dress."

"What do you mean?"

"There is nothing like a first impression. Of course you know none of this picnic-party; but after the news I have given you this morning, and one thing or the other, wouldn't you like to be more like the rest of the men of the party, for the benefit of the women? Some one of the women might even attract you, you know."

"And I shouldn't attract them, you mean," said Guy, laughing rather uncomfortably. "I am afraid they must take me for what I am worth. Perhaps there are some of them who ought to know."

"Many people, women especially, are slow to look behind appearances. As I said," added Lestrange cheerily, "there's nothing like a first impression. Now forget the old man, for you're no more of that than I am. Cut off that beard, which doesn't really become you, and come out as the Faucit you were."

"The Faucit I was?" said Guy, very sadly, even through the nervous excitement and restlessness which had taken possession of his whole being and manner since the episode of the rider. "The past is the past, and I don't know how."

"I do," was the reassuring answer; "or if I don't, my man Chaffers will. He's a treasure. I give him no wages to speak of, and he lives on the fat of the land, and is quite content. I ask no questions, and so am I. He never takes my clothes, that I know of, and is always dressed exactly like me. There he is," he concluded, beckoning again with a sign of the head to the man he had noticed in the road, who had passed on, with some picnic properties of which he was in charge, to the entrance by the old arch.

"Chaffers!" called Lestrange in that direction; and the man so summoned came in.

Even in the pre-occupation of his mind Guy Faucit was struck, and rather uncomfortably, by his curious appearance. Not only was he dressed like his master, but "made up at him," as the players say, in every available particular, presenting just the outward and inward difference between an original masterpiece and a careful copy, in which the form is so deftly

imitated, that it is difficult to say why the expression is so entirely gone. The height and figure of the man appeared to have been trained upon his master's tailor's measure; the gestures were almost the same, yet gave exactly the opposite effect—servility instead of masterfulness; the dress, as Lestrange said, was identical; and the colouring of the face looked as if stage-pigments had reproduced the other's in a waxier shape. The voice had attained by practice to the same pitch without the same music: and the whole effect was appreciably theatrical, and suggested one of those "doubles" of an actor who are introduced upon the stage, worked up through the footlight medium to what becomes for the first moment quite a startling illusion. Lestrange contemplated him with an amused gravity. He walked furtively into the middle of the quadrangle, keeping a wary eye on Frisco, whose appearance seemed rather to disconcert him.

"Yes, Count Lestrange," he said, in a voice which sounded, after the Count's, like an echo in a decline.

"Leave the hampers for a moment," said the Count. "Chaffers has a soul above hampers," he added to Guy; "but he condescends. This is my friend, Mr. Faucit, Chaffers. You have my little dressing-case with you?"

"Yes, Count Lestrange."

"Quite right. I never, my dear Faucit, travel without Chaffers, or he without my little case. One never knows. It is outside, Chaffers? Bring it."

"Yes, Count Lestrange." And the singular shadow effaced itself with an apologetic bow.

"What an odd-looking servant!" said Guy, as he went out. "Is he pleasant to have about you?"

"He knows my ways, which is essential to me in the wandering life I lead. I never know to-day where I may be to-morrow, and at Trouville or San Francisco Chaffers is equally at home. He is my courier, valet, confidential servant, secretary, everything; and his personal attachment to me is above suspicion. I secured that from the first in a way of my own—quite an amusing story."

But Faucit was paying no especial attention again, and, keenly watching the play of his face, Lestrange left him to his thoughts for a minute or two till the man Chaffers returned with the little case of which Lestrange had spoken. The Count beckoned him, and spoke to him in a low voice before the absorbed Faucit was aware of his presence.

"I want you to wait on Mr. Faucit, Chaffers, as if it were on myself."

Chaffers bowed.

"He will show you to his house, and tell you what he wants. A sweep or two of the razor will get rid of that beard, and—I want him to look his youngest, which should be young. The moustache is a little grey—and—you understand?" he added, with a gesture of the hand towards the jet-black facing of his own lip.

"Yes, Count Lestrange," was again the reply.

"Faucit," said the Count, looking down the road, "I see sign of carriages and horsemen in the distance. My lady's coachmen are too well fed, and feed their cattle too well, to vie with Jehu. But they will be here before long—the Pepperharrows, Pentonvilles, Brents, and all. Some of the party have been 'doing' something in the neighbourhood, and want righteous refreshment after their labours. Had not you better make your escape with Chaffers at once? You will soon be ready to face Society in its own uniform."

Faucit seemed to have gathered himself together again when Lestrange, with a slight emphasis, threw in

the name of Brent, and he too walked rapidly up to the road and threw a glance along it. Then he turned to Lestrange with a manner entirely changed from the sad self-possession which had marked him before, for his face and voice had in them something of a boy's eagerness, mixed with a singular kind of man's determination.

"Send your man with me, Lestrange," he said. "I don't know what fancy it can have been that made me provide myself with decent clothes, even in this out-of-the-way place. But you see," he added, with a nervous laugh, "one never knows what may happen."

"Never," said Lestrange, laughing. "Even the hermits of old probably put their Sunday best away in clover somewhere, in the driest part of the cell. No man burns the bridges which connect him with common sense till he can't help himself. Make haste."

"Come with me, Chaffers," said Guy Faucit, quickly; and he led the way through the disused path among the laurels by which Lestrange had entered, followed by the shadowy man-servant, between whom and his master another glance of intelligence passed. Frisco bounded after them.

Leaning against the ruin, with one foot crossed over the ankle of the other, Lestrange watched the pair, as with one hand he put the laurels aside, still with the look on his face, and still smoking.

"Just so," he said. "So far, so good."

CHAPTER VII.

THE PICNIC.

It would have needed something more of a knowledge of character, more of the power of reading the thoughts in the book of the features than was possessed even by the magician of Edgar Poe's curious fancy, to gather, either from the face or manner of the Count, when he was left alone, anything whatever of the thoughts that were passing in his mind. Perhaps there was something of visible relief when he found himself in his own companionship, as if it were more to his taste than that of any other man. But there was nothing to suggest to Asmodeus himself, whose part the chronicler may be taken to play, the smallest key to the schemes and purposes that were working in that subtle brain.

There are men among the mask-wearers who have been caught without their mask when alone; but this might have been the historic prisoner in the vizard of iron. The same singular smile—the same restless, piercing look—the same inscrutable expression—the same rapid observation of all about him, given now to things instead of men, were the characteristics of Lestrange by himself, as of Lestrange with others. When the two who had just left him had gone out of his sight, he began by taking a rapid survey of the place about him, more close than he had done when with Guy. He noted all the bearings of the ruin, paced the length and breadth from side to side, and made himself generally acquainted with all the details of the scene. Then he seated himself where Guy had sate, and took up the book which Guy had left behind. He glanced at the title, and turned the pages over, making some close study, as if with a purpose, of some of the things he read. Then he let the book fall open on his knee, and thoughtfully caressed with his hand the short, pointed beard. More and more he became self-involved, as one puzzled with some mysterious problem. After a time his eye glanced quickly towards the laurels, then quickly towards the road, and something of impatience

might have been suspected from his manner, even in spite of the impassive face.

But the suspicion could not last long, for after once more walking up to the parapet and leaning over it, he took out a telegram, and read it over to himself with a slight smile. Asmodeus is privileged with telegrams, and this one came from Scotland. "Foster has had another stroke, and died last night." Lestrange laughed quietly to himself as he read it, and tearing it into minute pieces, let them float away, to adhere together no more. He began whistling softly between his teeth, and slowly paced the quadrangle, with his hands crossed under his coat behind, and his eyes thoughtfully reading the ground, in the attitude so much associated with Napoleon the Third, to those who have seen him taking his walks in the garden of the Tuilleries.

No thoughts of the Count Lestrange ever took form upon his lips when he was alone. But Asmodeus may in this instance steal from his heart the peroration of his long soliloquy. "Oh, there must be a Providence somewhere—a Providence which I command—I. Why do they call me 'Satan Lestrange,' I wonder?"

He lifted his head and left his own company at this crisis in his thoughts, as the same clear voice which

had heralded the vision on the knoll broke in upon the silence again, this time in a burst of music, carolling like a bird or a bell the opening bars of the waltz from "Faust." In another second the owner of the voice came in through the lancet arch, followed by a goodly company of gilded youth and age, in their fashions more or less elastic or more or less leisurely.

It was obvious at once, however, that the queen of all the revels was Daisy Brent, and obvious that no other woman in the company could hold her own in looks or in grace with this winsome Diana. If distance lent an enchantment of its own to the picture on the knoll, the enchantment of proximity was only greater. The sweet face bore traces of hidden care and of hidden sorrow, and something that had the impress of a passionate regret. Recklessness, too, and a touch of defiance, had striven to set upon it an indelible seal. But the seal, though set, was not indelible. The eyes and mouth and whole expression carried too strongly for that the tokens of a very lovable womanhood, from which neither sorrow nor trouble nor evil had been able to efface the "springtime of her childish years."

To see Daisy Brent was to like her; to know her was to love her; and the many who did know her

availed themselves of the last privilege very largely. Nobody ever thought of disputing her royalty anywhere, and the most careless of the careless set in which she lived and moved and had her frivolous being felt a sort of uneasy wish that she were less careless and less frivolous than they. But if any such feeling ever troubled herself, she resolutely and immediately set it down.

The extent of the influence of Daisy Brent over the society assembled at Luscombe Abbey may be measured by the fact that she had insisted on a picnic in the height of the shooting-season, and that the most obstinate male creature had not attempted to dispute her will. For it was trying, certainly, to men of the mental constitution of the Duke of Surbiton and the Marquis of Norbiton, or of the unimpeachable social consistency of Sir Brummel Coates, to be called upon to agree to anything so irregular. All very well in the season, when it is well known that there is nothing for anybody to do, to make holiday of that kind on some popular cricket-ground or race-course, or somewhere in the vague country known as "up the river." But the serious business of life begins with autumn, and it is possible that the men's objections to sacrificing a

working day to the caprice of a pretty woman had something of conscience about them. The Honourable Jem Gosling, perhaps, was the solitary exception; for to him the world in all its aspects bore the pleasant face of butterflydom, and though he had placed it on record that, "bar the Brent, he would rather be out in the turnip-fields," he troubled himself about the weighty matter very little indeed.

> "A picnic by the river's brim
> Another picnic was to him."

Be these things as they may, the will of Daisy Brent was law; and so it came to pass that the rank and fashion of Luscombe Abbey, a social institution of great importance in a certain world, were assembled together for an anachronistic picnic in the grey and old-world ruins of the Owl's Nest, on that sunny and memorable September afternoon.

Daisy's cheek was flushed to its most becoming shade with the spirit and excitement of the ride, and her eyes sparkling with genuine enjoyment. In a moment her quick sight took in the picturesqueness of the whole scene, and the sward of living green which carpeted it.

"How delicious!" she exclaimed. "What a day for a ride, and what a carpet for a waltz! Why can't

one waltz in a riding-habit, and combine the two jolliest things in the world? Jemmy, take me round the waist and see if it's possible. Trà, là, làla, lalà, la, làla!"

"Awfully possible to take you round the waist," answered Jem Gosling, who had pushed into the place nearest to the divinity, and was ready to justify against all comers his position as one of Daisy's prime favourites. "Always feel as if I ought to take it between my thumb and finger, as if it were a pen."

"Tight-lacing," observed apart Miss Caroline Beaufort to her bosom friend, Miss Emily Challoner. "I do think she might let Jemmy alone."

"Why don't you take him away from her, dear?" was the sleepy answer.

Emily Challoner was tall and pale and slight, and affected a West Indian kind of manner, as of one who had suffered from the tropics. Carrie Beaufort was plump and small and merry, with twinkling eyes, and one of the most audacious little noses in the world. It always looked, with the rest of her face, as if it had been intended to be classical,—which indeed was a characteristic of all other Beaufort noses,—but had suddenly broken down at the bridge. It was reported in the family that a brother Beaufort

had sat upon it once for a continuous time in the nursery, and that all the little Beauforts had afterwards combined to sit on or otherwise put it back again whenever it showed signs of growing, like a Chinese woman's foot.

Then another voice, thick and doubtful, but exceedingly deliberate, took up the tale of Jemmy Gosling's complimentary speech.

"I don't like haw waltzing," said Sir Brummel Coates, baronet of old date, and the best dressed man in London; "in fact, I can't hum waltz. But hum pleasure of your waist haw—in fact, I wish I could."

There was this peculiarity in Sir Brummel's use of the two great monosyllables which serve so large a purpose with the blameless type which he adorned, that they never served with him for interjections, but were embodied, stopless, in the main current of his speech.

"How beautiful!" sighed Daisy, with a tender look at her second cavalier, who had secured the place on the other side of her. "What I like about Brum's compliments is their suggestiveness. They leave so much to the imagination."

"Haw," said Brum, looking red and awkward, and inwardly cogitating what the last remark might imply.

"Poor Brum," said Gosling; "you're going to catch it, old man."

"No, now," remonstrated Coates, "no. 'Pon my soul you're not fair."

Daisy turned to Lady Luscombe with an appealing look, where her hostess was standing close by, superintending arrangements, and in close converse with Lestrange, who had drawn quietly near her.

"Oh, Lady Luscombe, protect me! Here's Sir Brummel says I'm dark, and pledges his salvation that I dye my complexion!"

"Haw come!" said Sir Brummel, with an animal-like protest against a conclusion he entirely failed to follow, amidst the laughter of the party round.

"How much do you get on your salvation when you pledge it, Sir Brummel?" said Count Lestrange, drily. An unpleasant current ran down several spines as he spoke.

"Haw," muttered Coates between the hairs of his moustache, looking at the Count uncomfortably; "when the foreign fellow's down on one—where's the hum sherry and bitters?"

He turned aside to a congenial basket, and became engaged in a discussion of the relative merits of Orange

and Angostura with the Duke of Surbiton and the Marquis of Norbiton. Both the Duke and the Marquis preferred orange, which seemed to them in some way intertwined with the constitution, hereditary legislation, and the rights of property. There was a democratic sound of innovation attached to the younger form of bitters, which struck them as not quite safe.

"Never liked those things from America, Nor," said his Grace of Surbiton. "Never quite know where you are with them."

"Never," agreed the Marquis, emphatically. "All those sort of things are bad form."

If Nor had decided in favour of Angostura, Sur would have been equally convinced in his reasoning powers of the justice of the conclusion. The three men shook their heads sedately, for Coates had a preference for Angostura in spite of any political suspicion that might attach to it, and gravely had a drink together.

"Have a cigarette, Daisy," said Jemmy Gosling, as he fluttered fancy free among the hampers, lending a hand here, bestowing a good-natured word there, and generally in the best of tempers with himself and with mankind.

"Thanks awfully," answered his companion, carelessly, as she too helped in the spiriting. "I won't smoke before lunch."

They began to laugh and chat familiarly together much to the inward vexation of a tidy little figure in another part of the scene, with a pair of bright eyes and an enquiring nose between them.

"Jemmy," suddenly said Carrie Beaufort, with a little tap of a very dainty little foot, "come and help me to unpack this hamper."

She looked temptingly helpless over the task she had undertaken, and Jemmy Gosling would have found it difficult to decline the invitation, even if Daisy Brent had not released her votary by a nod and a smile. Beauty made his way to Carrie Beaufort's side, and they became very pleasantly engaged without loss of time.

The white cloths were laid in picturesque disorder about the strange old quadrangle, more accustomed to rougher and readier festivities from the big trade-town, than to the refined feast of Lucullus which did duty for a picnic to-day. I must leave it to pens more accustomed to the apotheosis of "menus" than mine to enter into detailed descriptions of what there was to

eat and drink. And indeed the powers of cookery on these occasions, whatever their possibilities upon paper, always seem in practice rather limited.

The placid and solitary observer who strolls round Lord's Ground during the Eton and Harrow match, and, if he knows nobody to beg a luncheon from, contents himself with a plate of sandwiches and a glass of beer at the tavern, remaining none the worse for either, finds much to speculate on in the absolute sameness of all the fare provided on the different carriages. The same pies seem to do duty all round; the galantine seems to have been turned out by machinery to go round the ground; the cold joints and ducks and fruits to be supplied by one universal purveyor, and even the cups to be compounded of the same receipt. The vintage of Champagne is, of course, the basis of the whole thing from Dan in the gate to Beersheba at the scoring-tent, and suggests sometimes a sort of helpless wonder where it all comes from, or how it is that the supply of the popular drink keeps such effective pace with the demand. No wonder Frenchmen drink so little champagne: there can be so little for them. What would be done to anybody in England who ventured to give a luncheon at Lord's or on the river without it? Would

he be brought up before Spiers and Pond, or Bertram and Roberts? The historian of these events is at times haunted by the thought that the time will come when we all shall be contracted for in the gross by some one of these enterprising culinary firms, and nationally "found" at so much a mouth, according to our stations in life, from the duke to the man between the sandwich-boards.

There was no lack of champagne in the feast provided by Lady Luscombe, and no lack of enjoyment of a certain kind among the guests who sate down to it. It was no very full-flavoured enjoyment, perhaps, and gave a certain impression of not having been earned, which sometimes tinges such meetings with satiety; and it decidedly rose with the champagne. But one exception, at all events, to any possible rule of non-enjoyment was to be found in worthy Lady Pepperharrow. The soap-boiler's widow was in her glory on the occasion, and beamed, upon everybody round her, reflections of her own harvest-moon-like content.

"The Bird," said Gosling, "was in first-class feather."

"This is really perfectly delightful," she murmured,

between two large forkfuls of lobster, to the Duke of Surbiton, upon her right. "Such eavenly scenery to eat in quite sheds an alo about the appetite. Doesn't your Grace think so?" she added.

The Duke looked rather puzzled, but thought it did.

"And lobsters I always find such olesome eating. There are people who find they disagree, but I never ad cause to complain in that way. And I have eaten," she continued, "a large number of them."

Surbiton watched the speaker with quiet admiration; and, without waiting to be asked, transferred a fresh supply of the luxury to her plate.

"Don't," whispered Norbiton, who was on the other side of his friend as usual. "She can't do it."

"She can," answered the other in the same tone. "I'll bet you five to one that she can, and another on that."

"Done," said Norbiton, in a business-like tone. And with a new and personal interest in the result, silently now that the matter was one of earnest, they watched the lobster disappear. The Duke won.

Meanwhile the good understanding between Gosling and his pretty neighbour was destined to be rudely disturbed. The Lord Viscount Pentonville was on the

alert. He had taken the deepest interest from the first in the arrangement of the proceedings. He trotted from place to place in all the pride of office, interfered unexpectedly with everybody at the wrong moment, marshalled the servants invariably wrong, and was followed by smothered execrations from their well-drilled ranks as he suddenly descended in his little tight boots upon the toes of one or another of them, and followed it up by knocking up against a second, and profusely apologizing to a third. Assiduously he uncorked mistaken bottles, and nearly made even Lady Pepperharrow ill by pouring her out a seltzer-and-salad-oil, under an impression of hock.

"It didn't taste like ock at all, your Grace," her ladyship said, when recovered in time to save the wager.

And when he had done all the mischief he could in that direction, the Lord Pentonville proceeded to inspect the various groups of two which might be found in different places, sheltered behind favouring joints, or pursuing the universal pastime under cover of popping champagne corks.

"D—do you see," he confided to Lady Luscombe, who was watching with uneasy interest the face of

Count Lestrange, "how close G—Gosling and your niece are?"

Recalled to the duties of an aunt and a careful chaperon, Lady Luscombe looked round and spoke to the Beauty. "Mr. Gosling," she said quietly, "I want you here, please."

"What a shame!" muttered poor Carrie, as her hard-won prize escaped her.

To do him justice, he had no wish at all to escape; and made his way to his hostess with what for him was but a bad grace, throwing regretful looks at his pretty companion.

Daisy Brent's eyes twinkled with amusement where she sate enthroned, and engaged in demolishing the intellect of the hapless Coates.

"How jolly to be in such request, Jemmy!" she said to Gosling as he passed her.

"Awfully," answered he.

"Never mind, dear!" purred Emily to her friend, whose bright little face showed obvious signs of her discontent, while Sir Brummel Coates, finding the play of Daisy's small sword too keen for the rather loose joints of his mental armour, by some means or another transferred himself to Emily Challoner's side.

"You won't sit on a fellow, Miss Challoner, will you?" he said.

"No; but I don't mind sitting next him."

"Haw."

The new move in the cards soon attracted the watchful Pentonville.

"C—C—Coates," he whispered in delight to Lady Luscombe, "is spooning Emily Ch—Challoner. Here, I say, the fellows have forgotten the pep—pep—pep—"

"Pepper, Pen?" asked Gosling, offering the article.

"No, salt!"

The serious business of refection and flirtation proceeded on its immemorial way. Some there were playing the game in unconscious earnest, and others in conscious sport, careless enough what the other player might be hoping or feeling. The Count Lestrange alone, self-involved and unusually silent, seemed to have little to add either to the festivity or the purposes of the scene. He had held some talk with Lady Luscombe in the old ironic vein, but not much, and his manner infected her with more and more of a strange uneasiness.

"Where is your promised guest?" she said.

"Wait," he answered.

The furtive and restless eyes were making a close study of the face of Daisy Brent, who, holding her own, first with one admirer and then with another, distributing glances here and fancy there, bright and laughing and careless, yet still with a tone of effort underlying and in an odd way harmonizing it all, moulted no feather of her royalty as queen of the feast.

CHAPTER VIII.

FACE TO FACE.

"AND this is the Owl's Nest," said Daisy, looking round her again, "where the Hermit dwells."

"Hangs out," suggested Gosling.

"Hangs out. What an awfully jolly old place! Just the sort of thing for a scene in a novel."

"Yes," answered Lestrange; "for an unexpected meeting between two old lovers."

He spoke the words carelessly, and a look of pain came over Daisy's face. She turned her head away from the table with a sort of sigh, and began absently to pluck and throw aside some of the wandering wild-flowers which clustered about in rich luxuriance, evolved out of some new and unconscious phase of the protoplasm.

"Quite too deliciously romantic!" sighed Carrie

Beaufort contentedly, as Jemmy Gosling had made his way back to her side.

"Carrie!" said her aunt, whose attention was called by the rash exclamation, beckoning her niece to her. "How often," she whispered to her in a severe tone, "have I told you not to be so much with Mr. Gosling!"

Poor Carrie's face fell an inch or two, and the sprightly nose lost some of its curl. "Bother!" was all she had to say to herself.

"Oh, romance!" Daisy exclaimed with impatience, as she left the place where she had been sitting. "Nobody goes in for that now; the days of romance are over."

"Are you sure?" said Lestrange, in a low voice.

He was close at her elbow as he spoke in that soft, mocking tone of his, into which he threw a touch of personal interest.

Lady Luscombe's eyes, which followed the Count very often, followed him now with an ill-pleased expression, which seemed to bode no good. Lady Pepperharrow, at her side, was eating still, under the guardianship of her two peers, who were now seriously engaged in testing her singular capacities in that way

to the uttermost. She had distanced the original wager a long way by this time.

"Are you sure?" then said Lestrange.

Daisy shrank from him a little as he addressed her; and then broke into a short, hard laugh.

"Come, you don't mean to say you believe in it?" she said.

"It depends. It's wonderful how long some women will indulge in it, in spite of all disillusion."

"I don't," said Daisy, with an impatient flourish of the little whip she had taken up again. "I care for nobody, no, not I, and everybody cares for me!" She designated the army of courtiers round with a rather contemptuous sweep of her whip.

"You care for—nobody? and are quite sure of it?" asked Lestrange, quietly as before. She looked at him sharp and straight, and the furtive eyes beat a crafty retreat from hers. Daisy always said that she never felt sure of their colour.

"Except my husband, of course!" she answered, with a harder laugh than before.

"No doubt. He's bad enough for any woman to be fond of."

"Let's drop the subject, then," Daisy said, with a

hasty shrug of her shoulders, a sort of shudder which passed over at the malice with which the last words were said. She turned away from Lestrange and surveyed the company, like a general looking out for the place to make his most telling attack. "Now, Brum!" she called out cheerily,—"when you and Emily have quite done with the sherry and bitters!"

Brum blushed between the hairs of his beard, detected in a clandestine flirtation in the wrong quarter.

"I say haw," he began, coming up to Daisy apologetically.

"You always do say so, dear Brum," she answered, and dallied with the victim in the toils again.

"I wish she wouldn't," languidly confided Emily to Carrie, with a decided spice of venom in the languor. "We were getting on so nicely." And the two Ariadnes applied themselves to mutual consolation.

"Half-an-hour," said Lestrange to himself, looking at his watch, as he turned away from the place where he had been standing with Daisy, and looked steadily down the road 'He must be here directly."

Lady Luscombe saw the direction of his look, and took the cue it gave her.

"Talking of romance," she said, "you shall see this hermit, the mysterious Mr. Fraser we heard about."

"By Jove!" said Gosling to the knot of men he was discoursing with; "is he coming, after all? How awfully jolly! Who can have drawn the old beggar?"

"A most romantic-looking man," contributed Lady Pepperharrow. "Quite the idea of an ermit about him, and looks as if he ate nothing but erbs and wild oney, like poor dear John the Baptist. I don't think I could be an ermit on only that. Now if I could ave—"

"Lobsters?" suggested Surbiton.

"Lobsters," she said, accepting the suggestion, "it might be done. Yet not, I think, quite to live on." Norbiton poured her out a glass of champagne. "Thank you; so kind of you to take care of me. All ermits are old, and I ave eard mostly dirty. This one is not dirty; but he is old—about sixty, I should think."

"How awfully stupid!" said Carrie. "Who wants romantic people of sixty?"

"The Clipper sixty!" laughed Gosling to himself. "You wait till you see him," he said to Carrie, who tried to take advantage of the opportunity to get him back to her side. But Master Jemmy had gravitated back to the yet more attractive metal; and even

Norbiton and Surbiton showed signs of weariness of the Pepperharrow's appetite, and a wish to join the circle now gathering round the queen.

Sir Brummel Coates was now in the foremost place, and his mind travelled for some time round the situation last suggested before it arrived at a terminus. Having come to his conclusion he published its results.

"Must be an awful hum bore to be sixty," he said reflectively.

The Lord Viscount Pentonville then put in his oar.

"Nothing when you are u—u—u—"

"Used to it, Pen?"

"No—sound! Is the h—hermit really coming here?"

"He said he would," said Lestrange, still leaning over the parapet, and looking down the road, every now and then taking in the attitude of Daisy, who had formed her court under the shadow of the south-west tower, right opposite the laurels. The eating and the drinking still went on at intervals, the pies and the joints stranded as wrecks of what they were, and the laughter and the talk seasoning the fruits and wine.

"A hermit!" lisped Emily Challoner; "what a

peculiar idea! How is it that we have not seen him before, Lady Luscombe?"

"My dear, there are no hermits in our set."

"By Jove, no!" said Gosling, emphatically.

"Jemmy, don't be light," commented Daisy. "Now, everybody, what's to be done next?"

It was a picturesque sight, the grouping of the brightly-dressed party with that sombre background of other days. The old world and the new seemed brought into a violent but harmonious collision, like a drawing-room bravely furnished, in defiance of South Kensington law,—which prescribes a period for every different room or house,—by some unconscious and instinctive taste which picks up everything pretty of its kind by turns, and combines them all together in a restful whole. But Daisy was more and more the centre of the company, attracted by her bright sallies and her ready talk to take part in the skirmishing. Lestrange alone did not seem inclined to add his quota to the general talk, where usually he was foremost in the battle; but restless, impatient, watchful, seemed for once a little unlike himself, and not the master of his usual serenity. Only a close observer would have noted it; and where he was concerned Lady Luscombe seemed a close

observer. She looked at him, and she looked at Daisy Brent, and was evidently trying in her mind to find the solution of some problem which was puzzling her.

"Jemmy, come and sit here!" suddenly said Carrie Beaufort, shaken out of the proprieties by impatience, and evidently rather tired of the undivided society of her intimate friend.

"Carrie!" said Lady Luscombe, in a low voice of rebuke.

"Thanks, I'm awfully comfortable!" answered Jem Gosling, reclined at his full length at Daisy's feet, like a cherubic Hamlet before his Ophelia, shutting his eyes for the full enjoyment of the cigarette which, with his cup of black coffee, he considered that his exertions at luncheon had fully earned him.

"I'm afraid you're a bad boy, Jemmy!" said Daisy, shaking her head at him, and half reclining on her side in an attitude of perfect and unstudied grace, which threw out in bold outline every curve of the lithe and perfect figure. Seen there and so, it was no wonder that all the men raved about her, and only some of the women.

"Come here, Lord Pentonville, there's plenty of room!" murmured poor little Carrie, who had a strong

sense that her own advantages were well worth notice, and felt inwardly resentful of the attractions of Daisy, whom she nevertheless liked and admired with all her honest heart.

The small viscount was playing his game of puss in the corner too, and vainly trying to edge his little person into the circle round Daisy.

"I hate these married women, Emily," suddenly added Carrie to her companion, in a burst of involuntary wrath.

"So do I, dear," assented the other with more warmth than usual. "But I wish I was one."

The aftermath of repose was upon everybody, and a general drowsiness seemed to be coming on in the warm and slanting rays of the September sun, travelling slowly on in his never-ending migration, to the far-off lands and waters which were waiting, dark and cold, for his return. The beautiful autumnal shades, nowhere more beautiful than among all this moorland growth, added their subtle influence to the spirit of the scene, and brought into the circle gathered in the grey old quadrangle some magnetic breath from the Island of Proserpine. There was a general and sleepy lull throughout the whole company, and the innumerable

small-talk of the insect world made a modest assertion of itself in the interval of sound, like, as George Eliot has finely said of it, "tiniest bells upon the garment of silence." Nobody noted the cat-like figure of the man Chaffers, as he glided in noiselessly through the archway; nobody except Lestrange. A look passed between them as he came up to speak in his master's ear, and Lestrange nodded, while Chaffers as quietly joined the other servants, who were now making up their own picnic in some comfortable housekeeper's room outside, furnished and provided by the care of good Dame Nature, time out of mind the merry-maker's architect.

"How restless you seem, Lestrange," said the watchful Lady Luscombe, as again the Count paced up and down the quadrangle in a fashion which rather added to the silence than took from it.

"Wait," he answered.

"You must find that coat pretty warm to take exercise in. Unbutton it," suggested Gosling, lazily looking up from his cigarette. He seemed very much of Fox's way of thinking—Why the book ?

"Thank you, no," answered the other. "I have a horror of cold."

"Why don't you warm yourself in an honest way

then, like the rest of us?" said Daisy. "How I hate a man who doesn't eat lunch, and won't even take a glass of wine in the middle of the day."

"To oblige you, I will, on this occasion only," Lestrange said. And as he said so he stood in the centre of the quadrangle, where a bottle of champagne was near Lady Pepperharrow's hand, as she sate by Lady Luscombe, and poured himself out a glass, looking towards Daisy. "And I think, ladies and gentlemen, that we ought to drink the health of the 'Hermit of the Owl's Nest,' who will be with us directly, I hope, and in his proper place."

"Hear, hear!" was the answering chorus. Daisy Brent held out her glass for Jem Gosling to fill, and the others followed suit all round.

"Hang the foreign fellow," muttered Coates. "He's going to make a damned haw speech."

"Shut up, Brum," said Daisy. "He won't ask you to return thanks."

"Haw." And the Baronet collapsed.

"Can't you imagine him," said Count Lestrange, in a strange tone of seriousness, "with the help of Lady Pepperharrow's eyes? I know nothing of his story, mind, so only guess. An old man, grey, weary, broken,

brought for the first time, under the bright September daylight, face to face with a world which he has forgotten, which has forgotten him—waking, it may be, from a long dream of sorrow and regret, to find that the waking only gives reality to the phantoms that haunted that troubled rest—the phantoms of broken faith, false love, cruel desertion—"

"Count Lestrange!" Daisy said, leaning forward.

One by one, with that strange emphasis of which he was the master, the strong and quiet words fell from him, and with some rapid certainty she felt that, spoken to all there, they were addressed straight to her. A dread and a wonder were upon her spirit, and a sudden forecast of a something that was to come. Was it quite sudden, or had the dread and the wonder sent out some ominous forerunners before them, when first she set foot in that enchanted circle, or stood upon the knoll behind?

"Will he find the world changed, do you think?" motionless in the middle of the circle, like the enchanter who might have drawn it, Lestrange went on.

There was the movement of a step behind the laurels in the tower-angle, and the next moment a man's hand was pushing them aside. "Here he comes,

to see—" and with a free and sudden gesture the left arm of Lestrange was directed to the spot.

Upon that spot every eye was riveted, as to every person present the force of that strange preamble had gone home. Above all the eyes of Daisy, which under the sense of sudden expectation, half of hope and all of fear, had dilated to a size unnaturally wide.

Straight through the laurels, and into the middle of the ground, Guy Faucit came. He came like a new presence; handsome, well-dressed, trim, and young. There was no beard upon the manly face, strong in its most perfect prime. The hair was cut and combed and short, fitting compactly to the fine head so firmly set upon the broad athletic shoulders, and the steady eyes looked straight and honestly before him.

Straight to her feet rose Daisy Brent, pale as the cloth behind her, at which she clutched with a crisped and nervous hand, looking full, full at the upright figure before her, and into the eyes which met hers without a quiver in either, like the crossing of two blades before the duel may begin.

"Aunt!" cried Carrie Beaufort.

"Good Heavens!" said Lady Luscombe, startled and wondering. "This is not Mr. Fraser!"

"There is a slight mistake," observed Lestrange, who had fallen a step back, to watch his effect. And he took the new-comer by the arm and led him a little more forward. "Let me introduce my friend—"

Daisy Brent's interruption was like a wailing cry. "Guy Faucit!"

The Count Lestrange only heard her.

"Just so," he said.

CHAPTER IX.

TRAVELLERS' TALES.

In this strange world of meetings and of partings, on the vexed borderland of rapture and of pain, no two ever came together with a greater stirring of the heart than these. Nothing more utterly unexpected—more utterly undreamed of—by both of them but a short space before, who had buried each the other's image deep in the inner corner, where the most cherished memories lie unacknowledged, with their petals folded from the light. Then the light breaks in, and draws out all the added richness of hue and texture which have been gathering unawares in the long and wintry sleep.

Lestrange had prepared his surprise with the art of a skilful hand when he brought Guy and Daisy together in that whirl of memories. The weird speech, addressed directly to her, with which he had suddenly heralded

Guy's entrance on the scene for the girl—girl still, to the core of her, with all the added lustre of womanhood and grace of custom—had raised in her mind a strange anticipation, which the romance of the surroundings, and the mysterious prescience which touches a spirit of fine issues,—who knows whence or how?—on the verge of supreme moments such as these, had namelessly begun.

For Guy, whose stronger fibre would bear stronger tests, the situation was more trying even than for her. The years which Daisy had devoted to the purchase of worldly wisdom—which so often turns out to be shoddy after the largest of prices has been paid for the genuine manufacture—he had spent in pursuit of a wider but less conventional experience, which was not so likely to stand him here in stead. A poor recluse and self-proscribed outcast from his fellows but an hour or two before, he came out into the full glare of social day, by right of wealth and of nurture a leader amongst men, to take his command up in her presence, for whom once he had so thirsted to command. Yet round the head he knew so well, which he longed to press to his heart with a sort of fiery longing, in the moment when it met his eyes, was written the most terrible sentence which

can be passed upon hearts as upon souls—"*Lasciate ogni speranza.*" Yet to all hearts, as to all souls, we pray, rises even in extremity the undying hope of appeal, of judgment reversed, and of sentence set aside. Who shall set a limit to the eternal possibilities, on this side death or upon the other?

So then they met. With all a good woman's instinct, and all a good woman's power, Daisy stood the awful test of that first moment with only the first moment's sign. Only Lestrange heard the cry she strangled in her throat; only Lestrange saw the rush of blood full to the forehead, and the deathly paleness which instantly followed, to give place almost as instantly to a perfect self-possession. If the Count had hoped for a more general effect, he was wrong. Not in that place and in that company, let the self-conquest cost her what it might when she should be alone, would Daisy Brent give way. All the passionate love of her life, all the innocent trust and promise of her girlhood, all the delicious story of the few months of pride and happiness which had preluded the long and weary blank of years, were lived and told again in that first instant of time. The eyes of all the others, except Lestrange, were for that instant and more, of course,

fixed upon Faucit, and averted from her; and before they had time to turn back her course was taken, the instantaneous and mortal struggle was past and the "*hysterica passio*" mastered, and the Daisy Fairfield of a moment was Daisy Brent again. More—before any one had spoken, she spoke; for she came frankly forward with her hand held out, and said,

"Mr. Faucit, is it you? I am really glad to meet you again."

Lestrange could admire a strong player, if he could admire nothing else.

"By G—" he muttered to himself, "that's a great woman, after all."

"Mrs. Brent, I think?" was Guy Faucit's commonplace answer, spoken in mere uncertainty what he should say, and guiltless of all intention to wound. But the name struck her like a wound, from him.

"Yes," she said.

"Now where in the world can you two have known each other?" asked Jem Gosling, delighted with his favourite hero's changed appearance, and delighted to find him an old acquaintance of his favourite heroine. "It's awfully like old times, Clipper, you know; but where did you meet Mrs. Brent?"

"Mrs. Brent and I knew each other at Oxford," he answered.

"At Oxford! nonsense! when I was up there too?"

"Yes, Mr. Gosling," said Daisy. "I was really at Oxford once when you were, and did not know it at the time. Think what neglect on my part, and how much I lost!"

She spoke to him in the old bright tone. But why didn't she call him "Jemmy," as usual?

The position might have been perilously near to tragedy but for Jem Gosling's intervention; and might have fallen into it yet if the muse of comedy, always on the watch when her sister is readiest with the dagger and bowl, had not introduced another personage into the conversation with timely effect.

"Who ever would have thought of it, Mr. Faucit?" said Lady Pepperharrow, warmly renewing acquaintance with her friend of past years. "And yet I don't know why not. It is in romantic scenes of this kind that one would naturally expect to meet a man of your power; though indeed I hardly know why. Only to think of it, Daisy! Do you remember how kind and careful Mr. Faucit was when the Oxford boys ad a rebellion, and wanted to pull the ouse down?"

This sweeping description of a Commemoration set everybody laughing, and relaxed the strain on the nerves both of Guy and Daisy, even though the associations which the words revived swept over both of them with a wave of pain. Jemmy Gosling, infinitely amused, brought it down to a question of dates, and established the fact that he must have himself been one of the insurgents on the occasion, with Bones of Balliol and Tompkins of Trinity, and many of like thew and sinew.

"Did you know Mr. Bones?" her ladyship asked, mindful of that youth's juvenile attentions.

"I should think I did," said Gosling. "Marrowbones we used to call him."

"Marrowbones!" interposed Carrie Beaufort, whose pert little nose had taken great interest in the new arrival. "Why?"

"Haven't a notion," answered Jemmy. "Cos it runs well, I suppose. Never knew any particular reason for nicknames; we made 'em anyhow. There was a fellow at Eton called Bernard, and we christened him Washpot, and got one name out of the other. How do you think we did it?"

Norbiton and Surbiton showed signs of interest, and

wondered if there was a bet in it. And Sir Brummel Coates opined to his languid neighbour, whose long eyelashes were drooping in a very becoming manner, that "there was some queer haw catch in it, Miss Challoner."

"First we called him St. Bernard," expounded Gosling, "then Dog, then Doeg, then the Edomite, then Edom, then Moab, and then Washpot. Took about five years to get at it, and then he left."

"What a very silly joke," murmured Emily, in the notes of an Eolian harp. She affected to trivialities the attitude of Hippolyta.

"Stoopid hum bosh," remarked Sir Brummel.

Carrie Beaufort's simpler soul was much delighted with Gosling's playful wit, and she inferred that Eton must have been very great fun, which introduced fresh matter, and started her and Jemmie off on one of their conversational rambles. Grateful enough for the diversion were Guy and Daisy, narrowly watched by the keen eyes of Lestrange. Lady Luscombe the while was intent upon him.

"When did those two know each other, and where?" she asked him. "And who and what is your striking-looking friend, whom you played off in

that masquerade? I am sure that I have seen him somewhere."

"I have told you all that there is to know about him; and the romance of his large fortune," answered the Count. "He will be a great addition to our party at the Abbey. You can ask him there before we go home."

"Poor old Bones!" said Faucit, meanwhile, as the old memories began to assert their sway. "Good little fellow he was. I wonder what has become of him."

"Took orders, don't you know?" said Gosling. "He always meant to."

"I never thought he would," was the other's answer.

"Did, though; and came out strong in the extreme low line. Quite down at the bottom, you know, Lady Pepperharrow—on a seesaw with your friend Mr. Birmingham Pope."

"I'm afraid e must be a very dangerous man," sighed her ladyship.

"Well, he thinks Pope is, you know, and pitches into him every week on a text about charity. Pope uses the same text to pitch into Bones with, so it cuts both ways, and comes to the same in the end. He is very sound in the low line, Bones is, and they call him

Grilled Bones now-a-days. Doosid thirsty work this; let's have a split soda, Clipper."

Guy Faucit fitted into his new place soon enough, as we are all of us apt to do when the time comes. There is a sense of unreality mixed up with our lives even at their gravest moments, which stands us in good stead at a crisis, and carries us, calm in all outward seeming, and sometimes even inwardly so, through trials and difficulties which look impossible on paper. That second self, which is a shadowy presence to all men, most realized where the fibre is finest, is ready at such times to step forward and relegate self the first to the background, and make us feel that all that is happening is happening to somebody else. Subtle men have explained this strange double existence by the geography of the brain, and its division into separate thinking parts. But then what explains that? What if that second self, with the half-formed suggestions which at times it makes, escaped before we can grasp them—of having been something else, of being something else, of having done all this before—be the immortal part of us, the thing called the soul? It projects us into another world very often, even here, and makes a world of visions out of this.

Daisy Brent could have told no one afterwards how she lived through that first meeting as she did, with the hero of her solitary love-story in flesh and blood again before her eyes. She looked at him furtively now and again, and saw upon the face that mark of the lasting sorrow which was not to be mistaken. He was alone then, was he? Had he remained unmarried all those years, with everything about him that might charm any woman that might have cared to win him? Or was the wife in the background somewhere, waiting to claim him when he joined her again? A thrill of something which might have been jealousy crossed Daisy's mind. Nonsense! what was this to her? what could it be? No; the second self came to the rescue, and the picnic ended in a dream for Daisy, who felt herself a kind of spirit for the nonce, her gross and earthly counterpart being somewhere else. Like the rest, she soon found herself listening with deep interest to Faucit. With instinctive courtesy, after the first minute or two he began to talk especially to Lady Luscombe, his hostess at the feast to which he had been so unexpectedly bidden, and to Lestrange, who was at her side. The Count, suppressing himself with quiet tact and art, led Faucit on to shine. He brought him, backward and

reserved at first, to talk of himself and his travels and adventures, his camp-fire experiences, his moving accidents by flood and field, his

> "Portance in his travel's history,
> Wherein of antres vast, and deserts idle,
> Rough quarries, rocks, and hills whose heads touch heaven,
> It was his hint to speak."

Upon which hint he spoke well, warming to his work as he went on. The things he had to talk about have an interest for everybody, and even Coates and Pentonville felt the better for listening.

Lady Luscombe was fairly fascinated by her new acquaintance, whose whole style of tone and thought apart even from the experiences he had to tell of, came upon her like a spell of mountain-air, and reminded her of the days when conversation for Marian Vavasour had meant something more than gossip and frivolity. And if she felt this, what did Daisy Brent feel? Every word Guy spoke, every expression he used, brought back the days when she had lived upon the fruit of his ripe and scholarly mind. He was not really changed, she thought. The same vivid observation, the same power of combination and reflection upon what he either saw or read, the same original use of all his

materials, marked his talk as of old; while it was the richer for the materials' newer stores of wealth, and for the growth of the mind to its maturest power. And the great education of sorrow had chastened and rounded off the whole. Not Desdemona, listening to Othello, more seriously and more delightedly inclined to hear. Mocking, cynical, devilish,—but himself thoroughly interested in Faucit's adventures,—Iago was on the watch.

Guy Faucit, meanwhile, was surprised at himself, and surprised to find, in spite of the hopelessness of the hope he had once lived for, the pleasure it was to him to be once more talking and talked with, listened to and appreciated. Lestrange was right. He was tired of playing the hermit, after all; and he felt a keen pleasure as he went on in a sense of his own graphic power. Probably there is no keener pleasure that a man can feel than the conscious exercise—the *ἐνεργεῖα* as old Aristotle hath it—of a power like that. He had not lost the old trick of fence, then, in all his years of silent self-suppression, in which he had probably not used as many words as came from him now in an hour. "The Man in the Mask" he had been called out in the West; but the mask was off now, and he breathed freely in his native air of culture.

Daisy's presence, perhaps, had more than a little to do with the eloquence which possessed his tongue, as it is just possible that while those horrid house-affairs of hers had drawn Desdemona thence, Senator Brabantio may have found the Moor of Venice a dull dog enough. Well did Guy know how closely Daisy Brent was listening, and though in the circle which had gathered round in the old quadrangle she was the farthest from him of all, he knew that he was talking to and for her. He knew, or he thought, that she alone of all there was aware of the reason of those years of travel and exile whose varied experiences he was depicting. He noted every turn of the graceful head, every change of the mobile face, and he saw with an especial pleasure how, with a playful gentleness, she caressed and made much of Frisco the dog.

The noble fellow had followed on his master's heels when he joined the party, and at once made a house-to-house visitation, sniff-wise, of all the members of it. He was pleasant to Carrie Beaufort, mistrustful to Coates, contemptuous of Pentonville as of Nor and Sur, and generally perceptive and reflective in his views. But he took Dáisy into his highest favour, moved by some odd impulse, at once, and she relished her

conquest of him more than many of her human victories. He deposited himself at her side, put his cold nose on her lap, and examined her features with close and fearless scrutiny, wagging his tail the while to and fro with a movement as slow and as regular as that of the pendulum of a kitchen clock. And she on her side welcomed this new friend with a curious warmth which had more than matter in it, patted the velvet head, and played with the silken ears, as she listened to his master's story of his purchase of the dog, in all the overpowering destructiveness of puppyhood, in the City of the golden gates.

"Where did you get this fine old fellow, Mr. Faucit?" she had asked.

"At San Francisco, his birthplace and his godmother in one," Faucit said. "It was three years ago, and Frisco has been my one confidant ever since. He knows everything about me."

"Yes?" she said.

It was the only time they addressed each other directly that afternoon.

The afternoon grew steadily to evening, rapt through many a rosy change. The tea went its homely round, by way of stirrup-cup, for those—something of

a minority—who preferred it to the attractions of *B.* and *S.*

Guy Faucit took a cup from Daisy's hand, which trembled just a little, for the spoon gave a tiny tell-tale click. The teas in Portland Place rushed back to the thoughts of both of them, through the opened flood-gates of memory. Guy thought it all over—all—in a moment, as he had thought it out to weariness, over and over again, in half the latitudes of the world. Yet, strange to say, for the first time he brought it to a new conclusion.

"It is impossible, impossible!" he thought; "there was some miserable mistake at the bottom of the whole thing."

Was it the magic of her presence which led him to that conclusion? Impassive and quiet under his strong English manner, the man had felt that presence all the time, in the quiver and the tingle of every subject nerve.

Evening; and the horses and carriages were ready. A pretty sight enough, as the animals stood champing the bits and pawing the ground, watched by the well-kemped grooms, on the picturesque old road, as the lengthening shadows fell.

Lady Luscombe, fairly pleased herself into a temporary forgetfulness of Lestrange's leadership, asked Guy Faucit very frankly if he would not come over to the Abbey the next day, and stay there for a time. Count Lestrange had told her about his change of fortunes, she said; and in words which were an echo of Lestrange's, she told him that he must play at hermit no more.

"You are too valuable an addition to society for that," she said.

He fenced with the invitation for some time, till it was repeated with even greater warmth, just as the party was breaking up.

"Do come, Mr. Faucit," Lady Luscombe insisted. "Won't you?"

He hesitated once more; and something made him look straight at Daisy, whose head was turned gracefully and carelessly away, while with her riding-whip she traced idle forms upon the ground. There was something in her attitude which spoke to him of an attention others could not see, unless it was the Count Lestrange, watching sideways. One moment's pause: then Guy spoke slowly.

"Thank you, Lady Luscombe. You are very kind. Yes, I will."

Daisy drew a long breath, and went towards the gate.

"Will you come to-morrow?" said Lady Luscombe.

"The day after, if you will receive me," he answered. "I have a few things to arrange here, and then I am free."

In a few minutes more the good nights had been said to the newly-elected member, and the cavalcade of carriages and horse passed fitfully away.

Long after the old ruin had fallen back again under the great dominion of solitude—long—long—till the stars had shone out one by one into their soothing harmony of splendour, and the invisible army of groundlings was chirping its loudest and merriest to welcome the march of night, Guy Faucit stood, deep in thought and deep in dreaming, leaning upon the parapet above the road, motionless almost as the dog that watched beside him, awe-stricken, groping his way in the mazes of a new and startling future. What was it to be?

END OF VOL. II.

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